

“Making Melody and Giving Thanks”  
August 16, 2009

Psalm 111  
Ephesians 5:15-20

I'm not sure if it's one of the greatest gifts of the Bible or one of its most annoying features that, if you choose to read it regularly and if you don't limit yourself to your favorite passages, it can come along and shake up whatever story you've developed about yourself or the world. If you use a prayer book with different Bible readings for each day, if you have the practice of reading through a book within the Bible every week or so, or if you follow a daily or weekly lectionary, all the sudden you can encounter a passage that leaves you realizing, “Oh, I was sure ‘X’ was true, but maybe it's ‘Y’ or even ‘Z’ that's the real story.”

This capacity of the Bible to shake things up can easily seem like a *gift* when we're stuck in believing that we're not good enough, that we don't have anything to offer, that we are, in some way, shape, or form, failures. If we're becoming convinced of our own inferiority, our own worthlessness, the voice of a loving God can come through Scripture and call us back toward sanity.

Through the prophet Isaiah, we can hear that holy voice saying, “You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you,” through apostle Paul we can hear it saying, “Nothing in all of creation – nothing – can separate you from my love,” and through Jesus we can hear, “I am with you always ... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Reading those words, hearing those words, and letting them be the healing balm they are meant to be can literally mean the difference between life or death ... life or death of the body or spirit, life or death of hope and possibility for the day, the week, or a lifetime.

But then there are other times, when reading the Bible regularly can shake up and shake loose some things we're not so sure we want to give up. When we are in the midst of the adrenaline rush and the sense of moral superiority in condemning, even hating, other people – fundamentalists (Christian or otherwise), terrorists, child abusers, or simply people of sharply different political persuasions – the voice of a God of justice can come through Scripture and call us back toward humility.

Through Jesus we can hear that voice saying, “Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you.” Through Jesus, we can hear that voice explaining that if we want forgiveness of our debts (or our trespasses or our sins), we better be willing to grant others that same gift of forgiveness. Through Jesus, we can hear that voice saying, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

And then there are those other times when some bit of the Bible comes along, taps you on your shoulder in the midst of a streak of self-congratulation, self-importance, and ego-tripping, and says, “Excuse me? What's going on here? Who died and made you God?” And that, my beloved brothers and sisters, is what I'm embarrassed to admit happened to me a week ago, when I pulled out the lectionary and encountered this morning's readings.

Last Sunday, I was feelin' pretty good. My vacation was about to end, and even though Chey and I still didn't have the final floor down in the bedroom, the den, the living room, or the dining room, we did have a closet where a hallway to nowhere used to be, and we did have 900 square feet of new plywood down on the floor. We had measured and sawed; we had hammered, hammered, and hammered. And, as I said, I was feelin' pretty good, pretty proud of ourselves and myself.

I was feeling pretty cocky, actually, rather *impressed* with myself, and along came Psalm 111, followed by just a few verses from the letter to the church in Ephesus. I'd been busy thinking about Chey and Nancy's wondrous works and mighty deeds, but the psalmist comes along and declares, "Great are *God's* works ... and *God's* mighty deeds. Who can forget *God's* wonders ... Holy and awesome is *God's* name."

With those words, my puffed-up chest and my swelled head started to go back to their right sizes – not too big and not too small, but just right – and I was ready to hear the words of Paul (or someone writing in his name). "Make the most of the time" (not, I think, so much because the days are evil, but because they are precious). "Be filled with the Spirit, making melody and giving thanks at all times."

[Big breath.] Oh ... oh... oh ... oh, yeah. Whatever it is that I can do, that any of us can do, that brings true joy and satisfaction is something that the Spirit of the Living God has made possible. Whatever we accomplish that brings joy, healing, or love into anyone's life is something that the *Spirit* makes possible. And so when we do indeed, in the words from Ephesians, make the most of the time and are filled with that Spirit, we're called to make melody – to rejoice – and to give thanks to the Holy One, moment after moment, day after day.

As I read and reread these words [hold up bulletin], that closet Chey and I had made and that new plywood on the floor started to look a little different. They no longer represented just what *we* had done. They began, instead, to look like what God had made possible, in so many subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

In the nails we had hammered in, I started to see my dad, who gave me a hammer many years ago and encouraged me to use it. In the pure audaciousness of taking on yet another kind of remodeling project we'd never done before, I saw Chey's adventurous, anything-is-possible spirit. In the very presence of all that plywood in our house, I saw Ev's generous spirit and his marvelous pickup truck. In the ability of my body to do the work, I saw the gift of life given to me through my mother and father. In our home itself and our presence in Sonoma, I saw this church's willingness to take a chance on a brand-new minister and invite Chey and me to become Sonomans. And in the time and resources to do what we did, I saw this congregation's love, support, and recognition of my need for time off.

And in all those things ... in and through and underneath and throughout all those gifts that made what I was so proud of doing possible ... was and is and always will be the Holy One of All Life; God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; the Spirit of Life and Love and Possibility. Great indeed are God's works and wonders. Holy and awesome are the Holy One's blessings.

The Psalms and many other parts of the Bible are filled with stories of God's mighty works and wonders, with praise for those works and wonders, and with calls for us to join in that praise. Unfortunately and mistakenly, I believe, the recitation of those works and wonders often focus, not on the works and wonders of God's love, but on

military conquests, the annihilation of enemies, and the defeat of those the Gospel of John and John's letters call the children of the dark.

This vulnerability to confusing our own power of violence and conquest with the power of God runs, not simply through the Bible, but through all of human history. In the distant past and just yesterday or today, we attribute to the Holy One some of our most monstrous and destructive behaviors ... the violence of September 11; our violence in response to September 11; the near-extinction of the native peoples of this country and so many other lands; the enslavement and exploitation of other human beings; our attempts to tame, control, and abuse the natural world for profit.

But within this book [hold up the Bible], within the Quran, within the sacred writings of other faiths and traditions, there is another story about the Holy One's mighty works and deeds ... a story that makes it possible to make the most of our time and to make melody and give thanks always. It is a story of a God of love, mercy, and justice, who called the world into being and then called it good, very good. It is a story of a God who cares for the orphan, the widow, the lost, the stranger, the alien, the prisoner. It is a story of a God who became more deeply known through an itinerant preacher who ate with and loved the outcast, who emphasized the ancient commandment to love our neighbors, and who taught us that our neighbor is anyone who needs our help. It is a story of a God who became known through the one who sought forgiveness for those who crucified him and offered peace to those who had abandoned him.

This book and the faith that draws from it, as well as other books and other faiths, testify to the Holy One's mighty deeds of vulnerable love, reconciling blessing, and abiding presence. God's might is not military might. God's might is not raw power. God's strength and wonders do not always protect us from disease or disappointment, violence or violation, surgery or searing, heartbreaking loss. Holy strength and sacred wonders come, instead, in the form of deep peace in the midst of distress, love and forgiveness instead of revenge, and the kindness of friends, strangers, and former enemies when kindness is the only thing that can sustain us.

When we make the most of the time and are willing to see the mighty power of God in love, tenderness, generosity, and the slow movement toward justice, toward God's commonwealth of peace, then we're ready to make melody and give thanks at all times. We're ready to sing the melodies of hope and possibility, love and forgiveness, and to give thanks for the small and not-so-small ways God's vision for us all breaks into our lives and our world.

We can also make the most of our time and see the mighty power of God in much less lofty things -- putting down a bunch of plywood, for example. The Holy One's mighty power is visible in the seemingly mundane details of our lives. So I invite you to join me in thinking about something that you're able to do that brings you genuine joy and delight, something that lifts your spirits and opens your heart. It could be something you do every day or every once in a while. It can be something you do by yourself or with someone else. Gardening, knitting, cooking. Design, construction, car repair. Reading to your grandchild or being read to. Making melody or listening to someone else's melodies. Watching the sunrise or the sunset or feeling the cooling breeze pick up after a hot day.

Think about something that reminds you that life is a precious gift of a loving Creator. Think about it. Do it. And then open yourself as fully as you can to knowing that that “it” and your ability to do and to enjoy it are gifts of the mighty, wondrous Spirit of Life. Take in those gifts and be ready for making melody and giving thanks. Sing your melody. Whistle it. Hum it. Beat it on a drum or a table or a desk. Dance it. Draw it. Write it. Just make sure you make that melody however you can and keep giving thanks for all the melodies in your life.

Amen.

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