

SERMON FOR October 30, 2005

Growing Passionate Disciples who are Building a Passionate Church:

Cultivating the Virtues of Gratitude and Compassion

Text: Psalm 8

This morning we are concluding a set of four sermons presenting our first life shape. Throughout this year I am going to be teaching about what it means to be disciples of Jesus through the use of eight geometric figures. Throughout the month of October we have been concentrating on the essential relationships disciples of Jesus are to cultivate. The up dimension focuses on our relationship with God. The in dimension concentrates on our life in Christian community. The out dimension zeros in on our relationships with those outside of fellowship of the Church.

As we turn to our third psalm for this month, Psalm 8, we will see how it is in cultivating the virtues of gratitude and compassion that we can give witness to Jesus in both word and action in our daily lives. Lives spent at work, school, and in other venues where we are often in contact with those who do not know Jesus.

The theme of Psalm 8 can be expressed like this:

"The majesty of God is great beyond words and worthy of our fervent worship and allegiance. And that majesty is manifest in the glory of God's supreme creation, human beings made in his image."

As we are growing in our worship of God we will be aware that the people with whom we share an office on Monday morning are worthy of our respect and care because they are part of his supreme creation. When we have a clear vision of who God is, we will hopefully see people with less of the frustration and cynicism that can mar interpersonal relationships.

The vision this psalm presents is that God is majestic above all the majesties of the universe and this majesty -- though dimmed and besmirched and defiled by sin -- shines in the glory of God's supreme creation, human beings.

Let's look at the text to see this vision and flesh out the truth. The Psalm begins and ends with the same statement. That makes it the unmistakably main statement. Everything else serves this.

1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The vision of God in this psalm is that he is LORD, the absolute God who simply IS without beginning and ending and utterly self-sufficient and free -- O LORD! And the vision is that he is OUR lord -- the God who makes a covenant with all who trust him, so that he becomes OURS. And the vision is that his name is majestic -- his name equals his true identity and character

and nature and reputation, all that there is about him is majestic and glorious. "IN ALL THE EARTH" -- he is not a tribal god or a territorial deity; he is majestic and supreme over all the earth and his splendor is above the heavens.

David, the writer of this psalm, is so caught up in the worship of God that he declares that God's glory is above the heavens. This means that there is so much of God's character and personality that surpasses us. It is beyond us.?"

The Psalm then moves from a picture of the majesty and grandeur of God to that of babes and infants.

"Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger."

Now there are a few unclear things in this verse. But let's take what seems to be fairly clear.

The verse says that God has foes, adversaries, enemies, people who are revengeful. And the verse says that these adversaries are going to be stilled, silenced, made to cease. And the verse says that the means of God's triumph here over his adversaries is what comes out of the mouth of nursing babes.

Let me make a suggestion for you to consider. Verses 4 and 5, I think, give the key to understanding verse 2. David asks in verse 4, "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

What is this being called man, woman? And he answers,

- First you have made them a little lower than *God*, and crowned them with glory and honor.
- And he answers, secondly, that these beings whom *God* makes are made in a radically different category from the animals -- "a little less than *God*."

Now connect that with the infant humans and nursing babes of verse 2. "Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger."

Why is it that what comes out of the mouth of these little humans has such strength that it can overcome the enemies of *God*? I think the answer is, at least in part, given by verse 5 - - Little infants and sucking babes are each made by *God* in the womb. Moreover they are made in the womb, like no other being, a little less than *God* and they are made in the womb by *God* and crowned with glory and majesty. Their supreme place in creation under *God* is so profound that even at the stage of being sucklings who open their mouth to cry or to coo or to babble, they are bearing witness to their unspeakable dignity in creation. *God* does not wait until a sucking babe is rational and independent to ascribe to him the glory and majesty of verse 5. When the suckling opens his mouth *God* is praised, strength is established by the sheer truth that a human creation in the image of the majestic *God* is here.

Something happens to many of us when we are in the presence of a new born and a young child. We are overcome with a sense of awe and gratitude at the gift and wonder of life. We too start to coo and make sounds that imitate this little one. Our babies can bring us to that place where we have our breath taken away and we want to know God in a deeper way.

As those who are disciples of Jesus one of the ways this psalm invites us to live is with a sense of awe and wonder because life is a remarkable gift. This is not only brought out in verse two but also in verse three as we look up at the night sky.

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established”.

Here is a picture of the majestic spiral galaxy NGC 4414, about 60 million light-years from Planet Earth. A light-year is the distance light travels in a year—approximately 9.6 trillion kilometers. The universe contains tens of billions of such galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars, making the universe so big that its vastness is impossible to comprehend.

If the Milky Way galaxy, in which our solar system is located, could be seen from a distance, it would look like the galaxy depicted here—a giant pinwheel about 100,000 light-years in diameter. It spins around its axis once every 200 million years. The Milky Way galaxy contains about 100 billion stars. To count them at the rate of one per second would take

about 3,000 years. I cannot even begin to take this in. But it does leave me wanting to adore the one who could create this.

When our lives are influenced by this sense of awe and wonder one of the ways this will be expressed is through gratitude. But the world is unfortunately full of resentment. What is resentment? Cold anger. "I'm angry at him. I'm angry at this. This is not the way I want it." Gradually, there are more and more things I am negative about, and soon I become a resentful person.

Resentment makes us cling to our failures or disappointments and complain about the losses in our life. Our life is full of losses— losses of dreams and losses of friends and losses of family and losses of hopes. There is always the lurking danger we will respond to these incredible pains in resentment. Resentment gives us a hardened heart.

This psalm calls us to gratitude. Gratitude doesn't mean that we don't take the pain and sorrow of life seriously. But when we are living our lives with an underlying attitude of thankfulness we are joining with David in affirming that life is filled with awe, majesty and praise because God is at the centre. And this will be a form of witness to those in our "out" angle relationships.

Can you be grateful for everything that has happened in your life—not just the good things but for all that brought you to today? It was the pain of a Son that created a family of people known as Christians. That's the mystery of God.

Part of our ministry is to help people to gradually let go of resentment, to discover that right in the middle of pain there is a blessing. A very wise Christian writer named Henri Nouwen has observed:

“Right in the middle of your tears—that's where the dance starts and joy is first felt. In this crazy world, there's an enormous distinction between good times and bad, between sorrow and joy. But in the eyes of God, they're never separated. Where there is pain, there is healing. Where there is mourning, there is dancing. Where there is poverty, there is the kingdom.”

As we grow in gratitude the psalm then invites us to look at others with compassion. Compassion is the recognition that life is to be lived walking with other people in ways that express deep care and involvement. Compassionate people are those who let others know they matter to them. Verses 6 - 8 invite us to live with compassion.

6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

The Psalmist says that God's greatness is revealed by what he intends to do with humans. David is saying that because of the unique

relationship people have with God, we are to have dominion over all other things. We are to rule the animal creation and all the natural forces in the world in which we live, and to exercise that dominion in an effective way.

Now David is not talking about our ability to force the animal creation to obey us. What he is describing is the relationship God intended in which the animals would willingly serve us. We get a little picture of it in our ability to tame the animals. You may have pet dogs or cats at home -- even birds, turtles, or snakes. You have tamed them, i.e., they willingly, gladly, cheerfully submit to you -- most of the time. That is a small reflection of what this Psalmist is describing. It is a demonstration of the willingness of the created world to obey us.

In Hebrews Chapter 2, the writer quotes this passage from psalm 8 and says two very significant things. First "We do not now see everything under his control." (Hebrews 2:8). That is clearly true. It is so obvious today. Here we are facing the fact that we have been so twisted and perverted by the Fall that instead of running the creation we are ruining it. We are polluting the air and consuming natural resources at a prodigious rate. We are befouling the waters and the soil and making it almost impossible for human life to continue. We must face this. There is no way out of it. It stares us in the face every time we turn around. Each time we take a breath we experience the terrible evidence for the truth of what the writer says in Hebrews "We do not yet see all things under our control." We find no way out.

But he also says something else. " 9 But we do see Jesus already given a crown of glory and honor. He was made a little lower than the angels. He suffered death. By the grace of God, he tasted death for everyone. That is why he was given his crown. (Hebrews 2:9 RSV). Because of the suffering of death God has crowned him with the glory and honor which he had intended for man at the beginning. In seeing Jesus we see that God yet intends to fulfill his original creation. Watch the Lord Jesus in the gospel record. The first thing he does is to change water into wine at a wedding feast. He short-circuited the process that I takes place in every vineyard in the Okanagan and thus changed water into wine. But he did not do that as God; he did it as man; man as God intended man to be. When he quieted the winds and the waves with the word, "Peace, be still," (Mark 4:39), and the wind whimpered and stopped its blowing and the waves quieted down, the disciples looked at one another and said, "What manner of man is this?" (Mark 4:41 KJV). They did not realize that what he had done was not done out of his inherent deity, but as a man indwelt by God. As Jesus himself said, "It is not I who do the works; it is the Father who dwells in me, he does the works," (John 14:10). When he broke the loaves and fishes and fed the five thousand he did not do that as God; he did that as man -- man ruling over creation, man fulfilling the intention of God for man. All the other natural miracles which he performed he did not as God but as man. Thus the writer of Hebrews says, "We see Jesus" (Hebrews 2:9) ... the beginning of a new humanity God is building.

The point of this is the following. When we are living as Jesus did when he was in the world God will work in and through us. Jesus' miracles were never

an end in themselves. They were exercised so that he could extend compassion to others. As his disciples we are to live in relationship with others in the same way.

All the disciples of Jesus are called to compassion. Compassion is not, first of all, something that you do (although it calls you to do many things). Compassion finds expression in what I would call ministry. Ministry is something that you have to trust. If you know you are the beloved, and if you keep forgiving those with whom you form community and celebrate their gifts, you cannot do other than minister.

Jesus cured people not by doing all sorts of complicated things. A power went out from him, and everyone was cured. He didn't say, "Let me talk to you for ten minutes, and maybe I can do something about this." Everyone who touched him was cured, because a power went out from his pure heart. He wanted one thing—to do the will of God. He was the completely obedient one, the one who was always listening to God. Out of this listening came an intimacy with God that radiated out to everyone Jesus saw and touched.

Ministry means you have to trust that. You have to trust that if you are the son and daughter of God, power will go out from you and that people will be healed. Trust in the healing power of Jesus' compassion. Trust that if you are living as the beloved you will heal people whether or not you notice it.

What a magnificent God who can work through babes and infants and who is deeply concerned about men and women, boys and girls. The One who created the heavens is concerned and compassionate toward us and

ultimately will fulfill all the dreams of humanity. "O Lord, our Lord, how wonderful is thy name in all the earth!"

We can witness to our God in our out relationships as we cultivate lives of gratitude and compassion.

Prayer:

We bow before you our Father, and almost tremble because we are privileged to call you Father -- such a great God, such a revelation of wisdom, greatness, power and strength and yet, our Father, our Lord, our God.

"That thou shouldst so delight in me and be the God thou art;
Is darkness to my intellect but sunshine to my heart.:

Thank you for it. If any here have not yet found the way to your heart through Jesus Christ we pray that this very moment they will open their heart to the One who has been seeking them for many years, that he may come into them and change them and make them part of a new creation. We ask in his name, Amen.