

PSALM 150

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with
tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

MATTHEW 13:10-17

The disciples came and asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"
He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to
them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given and they will have an
abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The
reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not
listen, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:"

'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never
perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they
have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and
understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you,
many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear
what you hear, but did not hear it.

PARABOLIC

Psalm 150
Matthew 13:10-17

Jesus loved to leave people scratching their heads. How come? Why not just say things straightforwardly so there can be no misunderstanding? His disciples had the same question: *Why do you speak to the people in parables?* If you listen closely to Jesus' answer, it appears as if it is because he wants people to really toss around in their heads and their hearts what he is saying. *The reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.* And just so we're all on the same page, isn't it true that when you get a very concrete answer to a complex question that you stop thinking about it almost immediately? You don't go any further with your inquiry. "Okay, I got the answer to that; let's move on."

But by their nature, parables contain secrets which are not logical. They are symbolic and require us to experience their meaning. They are like faith. You can't prove faith. You can't do a flow chart on it. It is more than a matter of the brain; it must include a big dose of the emotions and intuition. And Jesus wanted to get his followers out of their heads and into the deep internal fabrics of where they lived their lives.

Of course, he had private conversations with his disciples because he was training them for the future. So, he tells them, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given*". And then he adds this very cryptic sentence which we are going to wrestle with this morning: *For to those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* That really sounds harsh, like an ancient rendition of "the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer." And then you look at the reality of our country where our 50 richest citizens have assets equal to those of the poorest 265 million combined. Does this

mean the 50 have the secret and have been elevated into the kingdom while the others are on the outside looking in? Sounds like a gospel of prosperity to me. I guess Joel Osteen and Oral Roberts got it right!

Are you thinking about this issue now? Of course you are—it's Parabolic. It doesn't make logical sense and your brain is spinning it around looking for dots to connect. But before I offer you my interpretation (and it might be wrong), let me observe that I believe it is very relevant for our Thanksgiving holiday coming up Thursday during the first year of our pandemic, not to mention for the Christmas season which begins in another week.

It is not that difficult to decode if you interpret it—like you must with all passages—within the context of the entire biblical message which is nicely captured in Psalm 150: *Praise the Lord! Praise him with trumpet sound...Praise him with loud clashing cymbals...Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!* Indeed, praise and gratitude are the very life breath of our religious practice.

So, with that in mind, let us return to the mysterious sentences we have left dangling without interpretation. Notice that when Jesus says "*For to those who have more*", he does not specify what the *more* is. More of what? We jump to the conclusion that he is talking about money because he then says they will have an *abundance* and we associate *abundance* with wealth. But the saying makes a lot more sense within the context of the gospel if we fill in "gratitude" following the word *have*. Now it reads: *For to those who have gratitude, more will be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have no gratitude, even what they have will be taken away.*

Now we are square in the middle of what it means to be a person of faith. Dr. Ernest Holmes put it this way: "Praise and thanksgiving are affirmation of the Divine Presence, the divine abundance and the divine livingness; and it is only when we live affirmatively that we are happy."

And isn't it interesting that expressing gratitude is associated with improved

cardiovascular strength, sleep quality and much, much more. Professor and psychologist Robert Emmons of the University of California Davis states that “Gratitude enhances performance in every domain that’s been examined, psychological, relational, emotional and physical.”

In this sense, what Jesus has done for his disciples—and for us as well—is unveiled the source of healing and fulfillment. For doesn’t he then go on to say that if we could listen with our ears and see with our eyes and understand with our hearts that he would heal us?

And there it is. If we want to enjoy the abundance (translate *fulfillment*) in life, we turn to gratitude and praise because those can only flow from our hearts and are not dependent upon external circumstances. You can praise God anytime, anywhere...no matter what!

And guess what, we are approaching a holiday season that will challenge us in multiple ways. My wife and I have always been the hosts for Thanksgiving dinner for both sides of our family. I love to prepare the meal and fill the house with the aromas of cooking and enjoy the warm fellowship of three generations accompanied by lots of good conversation and laughter. But this year I will be roasting a chicken—probably for just the two of us. It will be unavoidably lonely and sad and now that we know the virus easily spreads from family gatherings, it is not a time to make exceptions and drop our guards. The holidays are always a setup for difficult events and this year arrives with multiple layers. What will you be facing?

The antidote, of course, is giving thanks. It will, after all, be *Thanksgiving*. And the motive for praise and gratitude is the awareness that God is present in everyone and everything. It is a recognition of the beauty and perfection of the created universe. It is an act of celebration of the vitality and diversity of all beings, rejoicing in the changing of the seasons and in the abundance of our great earth that sustains us; and the love that passes between us which gives our lives and our journeys through it a sense of meaning and purpose.

Isn’t there healing there for all of us? Isn’t this what we see if we don’t shut our eyes? Isn’t this what we hear if we don’t cover our ears? And isn’t this what moves us if we keep our

hearts open instead of giving ourselves over to sadness and despair? As Jesus told his disciples: *Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

Yes, we are blessed in so many different ways. In spite of—or maybe even *because of*—the challenges it presents this year, Thanksgiving is an invitation for much praise and gratitude for our own good. Just remember this: abundance in life comes from the inside out; not the other way around. Have a wonderful day, everyone!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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