

God's Grace - Human Response
A Sermon by the Rev Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
June 5, 2011

Text: Psalm 67

NRSV

¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, ² that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. ³ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon the earth. ⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

⁶ The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. ⁷ May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

The Sermon

In his book Praying the Psalms, Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes:

We pray together regularly “for all sorts and conditions of me” (and women), as the Book of Common Prayer puts it. We know all about those sorts and conditions, for we are among and like all those others.¹

I agree with Dr. Brueggemann that we are indeed among all these others, but I'm not as convinced that it is our natural inclination to feel or believe that we are like all of them.

In fact, if there is anything reflected in our letters to the editor, or our tendency to want to associate with people who think, believe, behave (at least in public) just like us, it is that there are precious few others who are just like us.

Indeed, isn't that what a great deal of the current or seemingly continuous “church wars,” and “church splits” and exodus from congregations and denominations is all about; about finding or refining in ever more precise terms the core convictions which define our understanding of God, the Bible, human nature, and so forth?

In the process, it is not only other people with whom we are seeking to find a sense of shared conviction and camaraderie, it is also God who we are inclined to create in our own image, rather than rest into the biblical statement that we were created in God's image.

Thus we get a bit (or a lot) on-edge when we hear or read biblical claims that God accepts and is more than willing to redeem everyone, including those we are quite convinced don't deserve such gracious acceptance.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. Praying the Psalms. Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1986.

Now please don't think that I am pointing my finger out at "folks like you," while excluding myself or "my kind of people."

We are all in this dilemma of seeking to define who or what God forgives, and/or accepts.

I remember clearly a class session during seminary where the professor was seeking to persuade us seminarians to consider New Testament texts that implied – or outright claimed – that Jesus was "soft on sin."

In the midst of this discussion, one of my classmates couldn't contain herself and blurted out, "Well, if that's the case, why have I tried to be so good all these years?"

As I recall we laughed at her honest outburst, but likely also blushed in recognition that we want God to be gracious and accepting, but not so gracious and accepting that all our hard work to be righteous and acceptable seem for naught.

Maybe that's why so many of us feel far more sympathy for the older brother in Jesus's parable of the Prodigal, than we do for the father who seems to have thrown out all standards of family pride in accepting the scoundrel of a son back into the family circle – with a party and a feast no less.

In the Old Testament we see this question of how far – and to whom – God's love extends playing out over and over. Thus we have passages which suggest or flat out say that human beings are acceptable to God only if they observe a laundry list of "Thou Shalt's" and "Thou Shalt Not's," and that emphasize what God finds acceptable and what God considers to be an abomination, alongside other passages which profess God's love for scoundrel's such as King David.

My goodness, sometimes you'd think David had never once given thought to the Holiness Codes of Israel, and then you read that David was a man "after God's own heart."

And those of us who like precision are tempted to call out, "You can't have it both ways, God (or David, or Bill, or whomever).

The Israelites are often called "children" in Scripture, and that fits, doesn't it?

Like human children, Israel wanted to claim God as their own, while not liking having to abide by the house rules god set forth in Scripture any more than most children – except the most obedient – want to accept parental restrictions on their behavior.

Some years back Kathy and I were observing our nephew Todd seeking to persuade his daughter Olivia that she should share her toys with her toddler sister Emily. Olivia immediately burst into tears and cried out, "Daddy, I can't!"

Not just, "I don't want to," but a claim that it was not within her capacity to share what was hers, with her little sister.

How human of Olivia. How honest.

And how like the way the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments reflect human tendencies to draw tight circles around who God includes in God's love, grace, and forgiveness, and who God is willing to punish and/or exclude.

To accept differing views of God, and differing views of Jesus as the Christ, pushes us to accept the complexity of understanding Scripture.

As Gilbert Highet is quoted as saying, "Anyone who reads the Bible and isn't puzzled at least half the time doesn't have his mind on what he's doing."

As with the Bible as a whole, so too with the Psalms.

When you open and begin to read the Psalms you find incredible words of comfort, and equally incredible proclamations of despair.

Read the Psalms and you can feel the various writers' (or at times the same writer's) comfort with God, or the sense that God is unapproachable and unfathomable.

You can find psalms that imply that God is "mine alone," or Israel's alone, and psalms that profess God as the God of all the nations and all the peoples of the earth.

My own bias lies with the expression that "God can't be God at all, unless He is God of all."

A way of viewing such disparities in the language of the psalms is to think of them as being written as reflections of periods when the author's or the nation of Israel's life seemed oriented and secure, or other times when life felt disoriented and alienated.

In other psalms we read reflections of a time when finally, after a long dry or troubled stretch, the individual or nation as a whole felt surprised by the joy and the grace of a reorientation.

In such circumstances life was not exactly as it had been prior to the trauma and upheaval; indeed life was not as bleak as it had been in their hour of greatest need; but it was beginning to make sense again, and they could once again affirm God's love for them – and maybe even for all humanity.

And thus we read this particular Psalm, which has lines implying a possessive view of God – a claiming of God as ours – followed by an expansive recognition that God is too big to be restricted to one tribe or people.

I've come to think of this as like a song, and have parsed Psalm 67 as follows. I'd encourage you to get out your pew Bibles and turn to this Psalm.

Verse one appears to be exclusive:

¹MAY GOD BE GRACIOUS TO US AND BLESS US AND MAKE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON US,

Verse two, however, appears to be inclusive:

² THAT YOUR WAY MAY BE KNOWN UPON EARTH, YOUR SAVING POWER AMONG ALL NATIONS.

Verses three and five are like the chorus in a hymn, repeating identical statements of challenge to all nations and peoples to praise God:

³ LET THE PEOPLES PRAISE YOU, O GOD; LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE YOU.

Verse four once also appears to be inclusive:

⁴ LET THE NATIONS BE GLAD AND SING FOR JOY, FOR YOU JUDGE THE PEOPLES WITH EQUITY AND GUIDE THE NATIONS UPON THE EARTH.

(Chorus)

⁵ LET THE PEOPLES PRAISE YOU, O GOD; LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE YOU.

Verse six returns to appearing to be exclusive:

⁶ THE EARTH HAS YIELDED ITS INCREASE; GOD, OUR GOD, HAS BLESSED US. ⁷ MAY GOD CONTINUE TO BLESS US;

The closing line is, however, once again inclusive:

LET ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH REVERE HIM.

This is a communion Sunday at First Presbyterian Church, and I'd like us, as we receive the elements to consider the alternating metaphors from Psalm 67 as a guide.

Just as the Psalm has claims that God is "ours," I'd like you to think that you can take the elements as God's gift through Christ to you – and yes – especially for you.

At the same time, however, have in mind that the Lord's Supper is not only God's gift for you, or for me, because we are told that Christ's self-giving was for all the people, not just for one group, one tribe, one brand of faith.

We indeed worship a gracious God who loves each of us dearly, but not to the exclusion of love for all humankind and all of creation.

Thanks be to God.