

Text: Psalm 145
Title: Need and Custom
Date: 07.09.17
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Every other week HARP (Hope's Association of Retired Persons) gathers around a long table to drink coffee, kibitz, and engage a book, article, or speaker. Twelve years ago, we read *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* by Lew Smedes. His story helped HARP folks tell their stories.

So, week after week, I heard stories of the old west-side, childhood during the depression, going off to war, coming home, trying to find work, marrying your sweetheart, and cobbling together a life. There were great stories of changing neighborhoods, changing churches, and changing cultures. There was great humor about the rules they were supposed to keep and the ways they got around those rules. There was a wonderful shared history....

Gert Dykstra, always with a chuckle, told of being a rebel ~ a Reformed Church gal marrying a Christian Reformed Church guy. Ruth Pelaski couldn't believe she drove a bus for all those years for all those Elim kids ~ but she was grateful to be of service. John Medema, struggling for breath, told dramatic stories of crossing over into Nazi territory to determine bombing coordinates. Bud Prium, with a broad smile, still talks of a wonderful woman ~ the love of his life. And, Emma Schimpa was always quick to tell of her aches and pains....

Those conversations were a rich gift and I wanted our kids to hear this oral history, this sense of time and place, their commitment in extraordinary circumstances, and how they were rooted in something bigger than self.

Psalm 145 recognizes that generation to generation we pass along something bigger than self. We pass on a culture, a tradition, a way of being, and a sense of God. For the Israelites, the promises and presence of God was transmitted along family lines. A reality-defining understanding of God and self was handed down from parent to child, from grandparent to grandchild, from generation to generation.

As the Psalmist puts it:

*One generation commends your works to another,
they tell of your mighty acts.*

Dear friends, this morning let us consider what one generation commends to another. Drawing on Psalm 145....

What would we tell our children and our children's children?
What song do we teach them to sing?
What would we pass along about the nature and activity of God?
What is essential from generation to generation?

Psalm 145 is an acrostic.

Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's alphabetically organized not thematically organized. An acrostic is a familiar poetic device and this one is not all that unique ~ except it is a letter short. When it got passed on and copied down somebody left out the letter *nun*. Go figure. But, part of what an acrostic intends to communicate is a measure of fullness. From A to Z, from *aleph* to *taw*, this is the whole package. So, from generation to generation, Psalm 145 is meant to extol the fullness of God.

Walter Brueggemann writes that many of the Psalms celebrate, in his words:

...the elemental generosity at the root of human life in God's world. There is enough. Israel sings its lyrics of abundance...

I like that phrase, "elemental generosity."

Psalm 145 is rooted in the trust that God will provide and that, to quote the Psalmist, "abundant goodness" will come from God's hands. In part that's the sustaining of the created order: sun and water and seasons and harvest and soil and growth and life and breath and grace. There's enough ~ an elemental generosity.

That is not to say that bad stuff won't happen. There will be conflict and trouble, all hell will break loose, economies will implode, creation will groan, politicians will fail, churches will close, cancer will have its day, but at rock bottom is the essential goodness and elemental generosity of God.

At 48th and Lake Shore Drive, between the bike path and the lake, there stands a 33-foot-tall stainless-steel figure entitled, "Looking up." Long, lanky, and genderless the head of the statue is tilted back to look straight up in the sky. The statue was previously in Austin, Texas and at the intersection of Park and East 53rd in New York City.

I think it captures a kind of elemental awe ~

to look up into the endlessly beautiful and star-spangled sky,
to look up into the constantly changing complexity of the cosmos,
to look up into the face of God and be mute with awe.

I want to pass on to our children a sense of awe and deep gratitude for the goodness of creation.

I want to nurture in them a sense of wonder for their bodies and this natural world.

I want our children to see abundant goodness in all people and know that all bear the image of God. I want our children to know the deep trust that God creates and sustains this world with an "elemental generosity."

That will require time outside with all manner of screens turned off.

That will require sitting with scripture as creation's soundtrack.

That will require missing worship inside (sometimes) for worship outside.

Dear friends, may we commend, one generation to another, a deep trust in the Creator and a fierce commitment to the good of creation.

Second thing. Psalm 145 stacks up a series of actions in response to God's generosity.

*One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts,
They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty ~
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.
They tell of the power of your awesome works ~
and I will proclaim your great deeds.
They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.*

The action is God's; the response is ours.

The generosity is God's; the gratitude is ours.

We are commending, telling, proclaiming, meditating, celebrating, singing....

But, then there is this startling line. Verse 8:

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

John Calvin describes that line as....

As clear and satisfactory a description of the nature of God....as can anywhere be found.

It is a startling line because it claims that God is not just creative elemental root, the ground of all being, but God has personhood. God is an emotive, responsive, relational being. Not just distant deity, but engaged, empathetic, and even compassionate, God. Walter Brueggemann says that understanding of God was:

Israel's only line of defense against the powers of chaos and destructiveness that make life wretched and finally impossible.

Again, I like that. God as an "only line of defense."

In response to all that is deadening and dehumanizing we want our children to know God not just as Creator, but as active relational Reality. We want our kids to know a deep abiding trust in God ~ a line of defense against all that is toxic and chaotic in this world.

We would commend to our children
not a list of propositions about God,
not rigid rules about God,
not even a wonderfully wrought catechism about God,
but a deep and abiding sense of belonging to God.

From generation to generation we would pass on
that God creates and loves,
that God is "unmoved-mover" and full of compassion,
that God is transcendent and immanent,
that God is both Creator and Christ.

There is a uniquely CRC hymn in the Gray Psalter with a quirky opening line:

Out of need and out of custom we have gathered here again....

The HARP folks remember a day when “out of need and out of custom” there was a religious glue that shaped and sustained life, school, family, work, etc. A particular culture was passed on and an ethnic enclave was held together....

In the last few decades that glue has been stretched, loosened, and in many ways lost. There are great gifts of more diversity, leadership by men and women, space to ask questions and be honest about brokenness, an inclusive spirit, etc. But it is also true that congregations are shrinking, worship attendance is declining, churches are closing, schools are smaller, and there is less social cohesion. I don’t know if there is less “need” but there is clearly less “custom.”

I recently heard Rob Bell and Rachel Held Evans talk about the deconstruction and decline of American Protestant church culture. They’re popular and powerful voices for those who can no longer live and breathe and be honest in the churches that shaped them....

They know that the church culture that shaped the HARP folks is dying but they don’t know what is emerging. They know that the old forms are fading but they don’t know what comes next....

So, in this new reality, what is it that we would commend from one generation to another? When old forms are fading, what is essential to what is emerging? What would hold both relevant “need” and shaping “custom?”

Dear friends, I don’t have all of those answers, but we could do worse than the bedrock confession that God is Creator and that God is also gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and rich in love. And the clearest, fullest expression of that personhood is Jesus Christ. We could do worse than to live in the tension between the goodness of God and the compassion of Christ. We could do worse than to live with the transcendence of God and the immanence of God. We could do worse than to pass on to our children the faith that God will not abandon us or his creation; and the expression of that commitment is Jesus Christ.

May our children and our children’s children know that they belong to God in Christ. From generation to generation may we commend, proclaim, meditate, celebrate, and sing....

Thanks be to God.
Amen.