

Songs in the Key of Life: God's Open Door Policy

A sermon preached by the Rev. Cathy Russell

August 7, 2011

Today is the beginning of four weeks when we spend some times with the psalms. The book of psalms is at once one of the most loved, and at the same time least preached books of the bible. The psalms may be sung and or recited in Sunday worship, prayed at a bedside or graveside, and yet they are rarely considered as a vehicle for the preacher. In fact, when I chose the psalm we have heard this morning, psalm 105 and looked on some of the different preaching sites I regularly turn to on the internet there was virtually (pun intended) nothing out there.

Why is this the case? There is a feeling that we just don't quite know what to do with the psalms- maybe were even a little afraid of them. For one thing the psalms are different from the histories or laws or gospels or letters in the bible, because unlike all these others, the psalms are written as poetry, and not as prose. For many of us, that itself is enough to make us run for the hills-isn't it?

When we hear the word poetry we see images of skinny, black clad beatniks, or bead wearing hippies, or these days, rap artists with pants that seem to sit somewhere around their knees. When we hear the word poetry we may think words like pretentious, silly, deliberately obscure, perhaps even morally suspect or offensive.

There's no denying that there's a lot of BAD poetry out there, just like there are a lot of bad novels, a lot of bad music, a lot of bad movies etc. On the other hand, poetry can succeed in being more honest, clear eyed, unambiguous and perfectly expressive, and with more economy than any other written form.

One of my favourite lines ever from a song comes from Joni Mitchell's *My Old Man*. It's the first line to the song's chorus which is *'Oh, but when he's gone, me and the lonesome blues collide, the bed's too big, the frying pan 's too wide.'* The frying pan 's too wide- four words- six syllables that captures exactly what it's like to get up and try and start the day without the one you love.

American author and host of *A Prairie Home Companion* radio show Garrison Keeler has written the following about the clarity of poetry- *“poetry is rather straightforward compared to ordinary conversation with people you don’t know well, which tends to... steadfastly refus(e) to share any genuine experience; rarely in ordinary conversation do people speak from the heart and mean what they say. How many times in the last week did someone offer you something from the heart? It’s there in poetry.”*

It’s there in the psalms. The psalms are all about sharing something from the heart, from the heart not only of the psalmist, but from the heart of the Jewish people, and even from the heart of God. Now, sometimes, what these hearts have to share is something we are not always sure we want to hear. That’s another reason we are scared of the psalms, they can be *too* honest, too revealing, sometimes disturbingly so, but that’s a theme we will take up another Sunday.

The psalm we heard this morning is certainly from the heart- and without question the most obvious emotion conveyed is one of joyful thanksgiving- of gratitude. I probably don’t need to tell you that expressing gratitude, saying thank you seems to be less and less a feature of our daily lives. The way that I, and likely many of you were brought up, when someone holds a door open for you, you say thank you. Likewise, if you are going through a door and someone is coming up close behind you, you wait and hold the door open for them.

It’s not very often these days that I hear the words “thank you” or “thanks”, or even get a smile and a nod for that simple gesture. And you know it’s a little thing in a way, but I have to admit- it bothers me. The absolute worst of course, is when people walk right on through, right on past you without breaking stride, without turning their head, without even eye contact, as if you’re not even there, as if the door just opened ,magically opened by itself at their approach. We might just chalk this change in behaviour up to a loss of good manners, but I would suggest that it goes deeper than that. It’s another symptom of this contemporary social disease of hyper-individualism. Hyper-individualism is accompanied by delusions that one is or can be totally independent, and self-sufficient. But to say thank you is precisely to admit that someone outside yourself has given you something, or freed you from something, or

made a point of doing something for your benefit, maybe even sacrificed something for your sake.

To say thank you counteracts the delusion of hyper-individualism. To say thank you is to admit “I can’t do it all on my own, I haven’t done it all on my own, and I am not doing it all on my own.” To say thank you is to admit that far from being independent, we are deeply dependent on others outside ourselves if we are to live lives that are fully and wholly human. To say thank you is to admit that far from being self-sufficient, ‘me myself and I’ is a deeply insufficient, in fact deficient philosophy and mode of operation.

This psalm 105 is a full and total admission that the life of God’s people, from the days of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, through the 7 year famine, through the generation of slavery, the plagues, the flight out of Egypt, through the wanderings in the desert, through to the present day is thanks to God. The Exodus, God’s liberation of an enslaved people is the foundational experience of Jewish identity- the one useful thing I was able to find out about this psalm during my web search was that it is recited on the first night of the Passover celebration.

The most famous image of the Exodus story is likely the picture of Moses using God’s power to divide the waters of the Red Sea so that the people can make their escape. Isn’t this the ultimate example of a door being held open, a door being held open for an enslaved people desperately running towards freedom? And this door that’s held open, it doesn’t just lead from the parking lot to the produce aisle- oh no. This is a door that leads from bondage to liberty, from worthlessness to dignity, from weeping to joy, and from death to life. And the psalmist is in no doubt about who held that door for these runaway slaves- none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This psalm is a victory song, but it is most of all a song of thanksgiving to God. A song of thanksgiving to God who both called forth their own power and resources, and gave them a power that went beyond anything they could have summoned up in themselves. The psalm is a song of thanksgiving for the God who held the door open, so that the people could pass through the doorway into another kind of life- from bondage to liberty from worthlessness to dignity, from weeping to joy and from death to life. This is the experience of people of faith. This was the experience of Jesus, who after all was a Jew, and who like all Jews claimed the Exodus experience as his own.

Perhaps on the first night of Passover, Jesus recited this very psalm, lifting up his own thanks for God`s saving work, for the faithfulness of God, and the new life given to Israel.

Jesus knew who was holding the door open, and he knew what life could be like on the other side of the doorway- in the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven. And God gave Jesus the mission of holding that door even wider so that *anyone* who wanted to claim the kind of freedom found- not in total independence and self-sufficiency, but in living for God and one another, could walk on through.

You can be sure that Jesus is holding the door open for you, for all of us even now. We might ask ourselves, when in my life have I experienced Christ holding the door open for me. Where have I experienced that remarkable transition from bondage to liberty, from worthlessness to dignity, from weeping to joy, and from death to life. Or we might ask ourselves where in my life, do I need Christ to hold a door open for me, right now. Where is it that I feel stuck, where do I feel the walls closing in, where does there seem to be no way forward. Or we might ask ourselves, how can I help Jesus hold the door open for someone else. How can I help to spread the good news that in Christ Jesus God truly has an open door policy.

Well, Psalm 105 calls on the people who have been given new life, who have walked through God`s open door, to live a life of thankfulness. As the people of God, we have the opportunity and the privilege of doing just that. Our stewardship, our gifts of time talent and treasure to God`s mission both show our thanks for God`s open door policy, and help others to find their way through to the other side.

The door is open, wide open. That door is the beginning of liberty, dignity, joy and life, for us and all of God`s children. And as disciples of Jesus we recognise, we celebrate, and we give thanks that there is someone holding the door for us. Thanks be to God, AMEN.

Loving God, we praise you and give you thanks

As your people have always done, we gather our hearts together to offer up our prayers, to give to you our deepest longings, our greatest fears, our most fervent joys for ourselves and for others. Loving God, we bring our burdens to you.

We pray for your world. We pray for the nation of Syria, a place of violence, oppression and unrest for over 5 months. We pray for real and meaningful change in the government, and a new agenda of openness, dialogue and reform

We pray for the people of Eastern Africa, a place turned to hell on earth by obscene famine. We pray for all those working to help, by giving money, by working with governments and NGO, by calling on the conscience of we who are astronomically wealthy by comparison. We pray for those who are beyond human help, especially the children whose last hope is your eternal love in heaven. Compassionate God, we bring our burdens to you.

We pray for our nation of Canada. We pray for all the unemployed and underemployed. We pray for seniors and families who must watch every penny. We pray for new Canadians who struggle to make a new for themselves and their families in a different culture, a different language, a different climate. God of every time and place, we bring our burdens to you

We pray for our church, and for its ministry in Jesus name. We give thanks for all our staff and the many volunteers who make St. Matthew`s a community of faith. We ask you to give us generous hearts and eager spirits- to offer ourselves and our gifts to those you have given us to love. God of Christian service, we bring our burdens to you.

We pray for all those known to us who need your consoling and healing presence.

Loving God, we offer all these prayers to you trusting in your great goodness and mercy, and through the name of Christ our Lord, who is alive and well, and moving in us through the Holy Spirit.