

Sermon Notes – April 30, 2017

“How Do I Love Thee?”

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- I don't know that this story is true, but I'm going to tell it to you anyway because I wish it were true ... In the 1960s, when the Apollo astronauts were preparing for the first moon landing, they did some training in the moon-like landscape of the deserts in the south-western US
- Here they are in New Mexico. That's Neil Armstrong in the middle ... holy spirits on moon.
- In this morning's reading, the author of Psalm 116 has a sacred message for us, translated from a different language.
- Before I get into the heart of that message, I want to clear up something from the first verse, which says, “I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my supplications.” In other words, I love God because my prayers were answered. Or maybe, I love God because I got what I wanted.
- This suggests triumphalism, or victory theology, which is something we see quite often in professional sports.
- In baseball, for example, the pitcher who gets the last strikeout of the game or the home-run hitter who steps on home plate can be seen crossing themselves or pointing at the sky, so we all know they give God the credit.
- In football, some player on the winning team is liable to begin the post-game interview by saying, “I want to give the glory to God,” or perhaps, “I give thanks to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”
- But the batter who strikes out doesn't point at the sky – he's more apt to break a bat over his knee. And the pitcher who gives up the home run asks for another ball without crossing himself. The player on the losing team never gives the glory to God for the defeat, although it seems obvious to me that if it was God's will for one team to win, then it was God's will for the other team to lose, and why wouldn't we all give thanks if God's will was done.
- But victory theology is so focused on winning it doesn't stop to examine its own logic.

- Personally, I think games are won and lost by players and coaches, and that it all happens without divine intervention.
- So it's easy to suspect victory theology when the Psalmist writes, in effect, I love God because I got what I wanted. In truth, though, we don't love because. We love, or we don't, but we don't love because. It's "how do I love thee, let me count the ways," not "Why do I love thee ..."
- I don't love Debbie because she makes me breakfast every morning. And a good thing, because I make my own breakfast. She doesn't love me because I do all the ironing. And a good thing, because I don't. It's because Debbie loves me that she makes me breakfast – if she actually did. It's because I love Debbie that I do all the ironing – if, in fact, I did do the ironing.
- In today's reading, the Psalmist writes, "I love the Lord because ..." but a quick read through the Psalms reveals that they teach us to love God no matter what is going on in our lives – good or bad.
- Apparently, the Psalmist recovered from a near-fatal illness, and in one of the verses we didn't read, he describes his experience: "The cords of death surrounded me; the constrictions of the grave squeezed me. I found trouble and sorrow." That's a modern translation, but it's a good one. The Psalmist didn't confront just the physical threat of illness. It was also a threat to the spirit.
- We experience all manner of trouble and sorrow. It's not just disease that surrounds us like the cords of death. The grave squeezes us with the constrictions of a dead-end, soul-sucking job; a loveless marriage; an abusive relationship that we can't find the way out of; a heavy load of debt; addiction; poverty; the list goes on.
- The psalmist isn't talking about anything that we aren't all familiar with. I'm reminded of a mathematical equation called the Archimedean spiral.
- It looks like this ... Does that help you understand the psalm?
- If you have ever seen the coil spring inside an old-fashioned wind-up watch, that's an Archimedean spiral.
- It's also called a goat-rope spiral, and it looks like this ... I think of it as a dog-leash spiral. If you have ever tied a dog on a long leash anywhere near a tree ...

- That's what happened to the Psalmist. He reached the end of his rope. Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the mostly widely respected Old Testament scholar of the past half century, says that Psalm 116 is a psalm of new orientation. If you grab your dog by the collar and make her go the other way around the tree, you give her a new orientation. And with every widening turn of the spiral, she has more room to move, more ground to sniff, more life to live, more healing of spirit.
- And that new orientation – whether it's physical, emotional or spiritual – brings the Psalmist to the question at the heart of this psalm: "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?"
- As people of faith, we have a great advantage over people who believe only in themselves. They don't have an outlet to say thank you. We have a forum, an opportunity and a reason to express our gratitude. We do so in worship in song and in prayer; we do so by giving generously so others may also know gratitude; we do so in every aspect of our living; we do so by approaching every day with an attitude of gratitude.
- What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? This, to me, is the fundamental question of faith. And for me, faith begins with "Thank you." For me, thanksgiving is the foundation and the daily expression of my faith. Being thankful makes me want to help others – to love my neighbor and to do unto others. By definition, gratitude is an outward-looking sensibility – we don't write thank-you cards to ourselves, but to others.
- Having said that, thanksgiving is easy for me. I've had a good life – I am having a good life. Things have gone well for me. I suppose I could find things to complain about – and occasionally I do, but for the most part, thankfulness is a positive outlook, one that focuses on the good things in our own lives without blinding us to the troubles in the lives of others.
- So I know that thanksgiving is not easy for everyone. As much as faith builds a gratitude attitude, it's not everybody's starting place. For many in South and Central America, the starting place is liberation. For some feminists, it's equality. For other people, it's justice. But for me, and I suspect for many of us here this morning, it's thanksgiving.
- The Psalmist starts with thanksgiving, but he doesn't stop there. He mentions God's mercy, God's desire, he says, to protect the simple. He

mentions freedom, the loosing of bonds. And humility – I am like the child of your serving-maid, he says, and when this was written, that was about as low as you could go.

- Here's a startling phrase: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." And I want to ask, What's precious about death? Then I remember being with my mother when she died. That was as sacred a time as the birth of my children. I'm thankful I was there, and yes, the memory of that time is precious to me.
- What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? The author responds: I will lift up the cup of salvation, something we do every time we celebrate communion; I will offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, something we do every time we take up the offering; and finally, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all the people.
- I will pay my vows. To me, that means I will honour my promises, honour my commitment to my faith. That is, I will seek to be loving and kind, to be generous and merciful, to be patient and humble, to be thankful. And I will do this in the presence of all the people – not just in my thoughts but also in public, in my relationships with family and friends and neighbours and strangers.
- What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I shall give my whole life. I shall be as one who brings light to the world.
- Years ago, we stood and waved our cigarette lighters at concerts. Now we wave our phones. I will pay my vows to the Lord. I will not be as one who sits in the darkness. I will be as one who shines a light.