

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

*¹ I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
¹² What shall I return to the Lord
for all his bounty to me?
¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord,
¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.
¹⁶ O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.
¹⁷ I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord.
¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord!*

A husband and wife were at a party chatting with some friends when the subject of marriage counseling came up. “Oh, well never need that. My wife and I have a great relationship,” the husband explained. “She was a communications major in college, and I majored in theatre arts.” He continued, “She communicates well, and I act like I’m listening.”

When someone listens to you, you are the recipient of a very precious gift. It’s one thing to be heard and another thing to have someone listen to you. Hearing is a biological experience; our ears hear sounds that are processed in our brains that foster and further our understanding. Even when our biological hearing fails us, different aids and apparatuses can assist us in hearing. But “listening” takes on a deeper process where we bring our lived experienced into what we hear to find sympathy, empathy, or common threads that connect what is said to a larger story.

Today’s scripture reading is a psalm of personal thanksgiving for God who not only hears of the psalmist, but God listens. Something happened in the psalmist’s life—something dangerous—we don’t know what. What we do know is that he turned to God in prayer and God listened. The writer says, “I love God, because he listens to my voice, and my cries for mercy.”

The Hebrew word for hearing or listening is “sama”; but in this context it obviously means something more than just hearing. We know this because the psalmist says that, “God has turned his ear to me...” To turn one’s ear to someone is to position yourself to hear that person as clearly as possible. So, he believes God made a special effort to hear him. He also knows God was listening to his passionate prayer because God did something to save him. Because God

listened and responded to the psalmist’s prayer, he said he will continue to call on God for as long as he lived.

My friends, God does the same for all who call upon his name. When we cry out for God’s help, God bends down and listens to your voice, and God responds. God is not burdened by our needs. God wants what is best for each of us. God wants to help. That’s why he listens so carefully. Knowing this we should find within ourselves a comforting and encouraging assurance that, like the psalmist, without hesitation, we continue to call on God. We need God. Isn’t it good to know that we can rely on him?

Further in the psalm, in verse twelve the grateful psalmist asks a rhetorical question, “What will I give God for all his benefits towards me? He knows that he has received something very special from God, and he has nothing equivalent to give in return to God to express his gratitude.

It is important to realize that the psalmist does not think it possible to actually repay God in some reciprocal, you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours kind of way. Rather, the psalmist, overcome by the grace bestowed upon him, is concerned about the relationship he shares with God and now seeks an appropriate response.

As he ponders this, he comes up with three things to show his appreciation to God. The psalmist says, I’ll lift high the cup of salvation—a toast to God! I’ll pray in the name of God; and I’ll complete what I promised God I’d do, and I’ll do it together with his people. Let’s take a look at each of these.

I’ll lift high the cup of salvation—a toast to God! I’ll pray in the name of God. What is this cup of salvation? The expression “cup of salvation” in verse 13 is found only here and its meaning is unclear. It may refer to a drink offering that often accompanied temple sacrifices (Numbers 15:8-10; 28) or it may be a figurative expression for drinking in the benefits and blessings of God’s salvation.

We can think of it this way; of course, we all know that a cup is a container from which one drinks. In most cases, the contents of the container are more important than the container itself. Sometimes the bible tells of contents in the cup being blessings of abundance or comfort—all good stuff. However, the bible sometimes tells of cups of God’s wrath, such as when the prophet Isaiah speaks these harsh words to a God-defying Jerusalem, “So wake up! Rub the sleep from your eyes! Up on your feet, Jerusalem! You’ve drunk the cup God handed you, the strong drink of his anger. You drank it down to the last drop, staggered and collapsed, dead-drunk. It certainly doesn’t sound like a cup I would want to partake of.

But here in verse thirteen, the psalmist takes the cup of salvation. He drinks deeply from the **blessing** that God has gave him—the renewed life that God has given him.

In our present day as Christians, the “cup of salvation” reminds us of another cup, the cup that is poured out for us as the new covenant in Jesus’ blood (Luke 22:21). The cup of salvation is the saving grace we receive because of what Christ did for us—giving us new life—a better life than what the secular world has to offer. It’s a new life in Christ. Like the psalmist we drink from this cup with thanksgiving...as a way of honoring God for the blessing of salvation that God gives us. So, what can we give God in response to his care? We give God our hearts in worship...honoring him and thanking him for the gift of salvation.

The psalmist says he will pray in the name of God. His commitment to prayer shows his faithfulness to God by depending on God. What he gives God by doing this is the recognition that God is the one and only true God and he needed God more than anything else in the world.

He was telling God that he would rely on God and not himself for finding the answers for life’s difficult questions, for God’s help during trials and sufferings.

Prayer should be an important part of our daily spiritual journey. One of the things about prayer that we may not often think about is that fact that prayer is not only a way of communicating with God, but it is a way of honoring God, letting him know how much he means to us, not only through our words, but through the mere fact that we spend time with him, putting him above the others things that consume us. Turning to God in prayer tells God there is no one, no thing more important to us than him. It tells God we need him in our lives, and God wants nothing more than to be with us. We are very important to him.

The psalmist also says he will, “I’ll complete what I promised God I’d do, and I’ll do it together with his people.” Most of the commentaries I used for studying this text said it is probably safe to assume that while the psalmist was going through his traumatic experience, his prayer likely included a promise to do something for God if God got him through his troubles. So here the psalmist is saying, he will follow through with what he promised. Not only will he do as he promised to God, but he will do so “in the presence of all his people,” therefore, testifying to the faithfulness God has shown him.

Who of us hasn’t made promises to God? Your baptismal or transfer of membership vows you make are promises you make to God and the Church. Do you remember those? Let me remind you: “Do you believe that Jesus is God’s Son, and do you receive and trust him as your Savior and Lord? Will you turn away from all sin and will you endeavor by God’s grace to live according to the example and teachings of Jesus? Will you be loyal to the church, upholding it by your prayers and your presence, your substance and your service?” The transfer of membership vows is similar to these baptismal.

These are very important vows we make to God in the presence of all God’s people. But it does not end with the moment we make them to God. These are lifelong vows that should be testifying to our experience of God’s faithfulness to us. And, when we live out these vows through thick and thin we express our gratitude to God for what he has done for us. We commit ourselves to serving God and others. There is no greater gift of thanksgiving that we can give to God than our whole selves which we commit to God through these vows.

There’s at least one other thing that we need to consider. When we think about what it is that we can return to God for listening to us, we should commit ourselves to listening, really listening to him. As God listened and responded to the psalmist’s plea, and as God does the same for us, we should listen and respond to God’s voice. Just as we want someone to listen when we speak, God wants us to listen to him. This honors God, and it enriches our relationship with God.

We should treat prayer for what it is, a two-way conversation with God, and learn to be quiet long enough for him to get a word in edge ways. Nicky Gumbel, in his book “Questions of Life” compares it to a visit to the doctor, he writes “Suppose I go to the doctor and say, ‘Doctor, I have a number of problems: I have a problem of fungus growing under my toenails, I have piles, my eyes itch, I need a flu jab; I have very bad backaches and I have tennis elbow.’ Then, having got through my list of complaints, I look at my watch and say, ‘Goodness me, time is getting on. Well, I must be off. Thanks very much for listening.’ The doctor might want to say, ‘Hang on a second. Why don’t you listen to me?’ If whenever we pray we only speak to God and never take time to listen, we make the same mistake.”

God is listening. Have we noticed? How have we shown our gratitude for God’s listening and God’s response? And, are we listening to God? These are important things to ponder and talk to God about. Amen.