

“Blessing Overflow”
Luke 20:37-38
November 7, 2010
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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“What is the chief end of (man)?” Some of you will recognize that question as the opening line of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which comes from around the year 1640, when leaders of the newly forming Protestant churches were developing ways to summarize and teach the Christian faith to children and to newcomers to the faith. The Westminster catechism has been a standard in many Reformed churches, the Presbyterian Church among them. In a question and answer format, which was intended to be memorized, the catechism teaches the basics of the faith. Though in recent decades this style of learning came to be out of fashion, the Presbyterian Church has published a modern version of the catechism, with more inclusive language, realizing that we can’t assume in these days that the Christian faith gets passed on simply by osmosis. There are things to be learned and known. Our faith has content – a distinct content – about which, in our increasingly diverse world, we need to be clear.

Some of us have been reading and discussing Anthony Robinson’s book, “What’s Theology got to do with It?” in which he talks about how our mainline Protestant churches have not been clear about our core identity as the church of Jesus Christ, and how the health and vitality of our churches lay in claiming that identity and living out of it.

And so, right at the beginning, right up front, those early church reformers put a pretty big question, a question that makes sense at the beginning: “What is the chief end (goal, purpose) of humankind?” And the answer they provide, faithfully discerned from scripture and the witness of the church and its saints across the ages: “. . . to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Note what it doesn't say. It doesn't say that the chief end of humankind is to be happy, to be at peace, to be successful, to be fulfilled – but to glorify God, to enjoy God forever.

Psalm 145 is an example of such an approach to a life of faith. To glorify God – the psalm expresses it in different ways: “I will extol you . . .,” “Every day I will bless you . . .,” “One generation shall laud your works to another . . .,” “I will declare your greatness . . .,” “They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness.”

Our chief end – purpose, goal – is to do that!

There are 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms. The last six, Psalm 145-150, are marked as “Songs of Praise.” In the Psalms as a whole there is a movement between lament and praise, for surely both are movements of the human spirit in response to God. Sometimes you will see praise and lament occurring in the same psalm. But the movement doesn't get stuck in a back and forth pattern between them. It always moves toward praise, and the final six psalms contain almost no notes of lament, or even mention of enemies – but are wholly focused on praising God. Psalm 145 sets this final movement of praise in motion. The words of praise become more and more exuberant until the final line of Psalm 150, “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.”

Where does this come from? Why is it so basic to our faith? Neither the dry questions of a catechism nor the poetic flights of the Psalms have power in themselves to bring us to praise of God, any more than the teaching that you should love your neighbor as yourself can actually make you treat your neighbor more lovingly. No, something has to be inside that cannot be contained there, but has to be let out, that has to be expressed, until, using the Psalms themselves as example, it has to explode.

Psalm 145 gives nearly every reason possible to praise God. It is an acrostic, meaning that each line of the psalm begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It aims to be

comprehensive. So God is described as the king whose reign is universal in time and space. His kingship is defined by both power and goodness. God does “mighty acts” both in creating the world and in delivering God’s people from harm. God provides food and protection to those in need. God is also “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love;” splendid and glorious, but also kind, watching over those who love him. For all of this God is worthy of praise. But God is also praiseworthy simply for being God – just as a beautiful flower is praiseworthy simply for being itself.

That’s a lot of reasons for praise! And so the psalmist imagines his praise spilling out to all others, passed on from generation to generation – not just the words, the answers, the doctrines. These things might hold the content, but praise is the vehicle that sends them flying, the heart of faith expressed in praise to God and the taking up of God’s intention for the world – an unbroken chain of praise continuing forever.

The Psalms are the prayer book of the church. They call us to enter into this chain of praise. We are encouraged to claim not just the content of the faith but the vehicle too – claim the movement of praise of God as the first and last word of our own lives.

There are times when we don’t feel like praising, times when words of lament are closer to the truth of our own experience, times of hardship and heartache when it seems like there are more reasons to lament than to praise. These words are given to us to pray so as to reshape us toward a different direction. Every day won’t be a good day, but even so, the psalmist sings, “I will praise you.” We sing it and pray it, sing it and pray it – and our awareness is changed, and we begin to notice the power and goodness of God in our lives – how God has provided for us, has been close to us, has fulfilled our desires and our needs (which themselves may have been changed in our praying).

This is the season of thanksgiving and generosity. There is no better way to approach this time than to consider the abundance from God’s creative hand, and our participation in the

beauty of the creative process that continues even today, God's creative hand at work in the world. Walter Brueggemann writes extensively on the theme of abundance in the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms. He says that in the Hebrew scriptures "Israel reflects on the free gift of food: the earth germinates, the seasons work, water, sunshine, breeding, production, nurture, availability. It is a guaranteed system culminating in the food chain for those in God's image, the whole designed for us. There is an elemental generosity at the root of our human life in God's world. There is enough. Israel sings its lyrics of abundance."

There is an overflow of blessings from God, and in this psalm we also hear a call for our participation: "We bask in the overflow of creation; our song enacts the overflow," he writes. "We discover that some of the abundance of God's generosity has been entrusted to our hand. As the singing proceeds, we begin to notice the grace of generosity emerging in our own life. When the song ends, the conversation in the choir continues. We are left with courage, freedom, and imagination, and we are given sufficient energy to care for the humanness, the humaneness, the humanization of the world. In the act of humanizing, the song of praise continues, for the creation does what the creator hopes."

I close with Brueggemann's prayer that draws on Psalm 145: "When we sound these ancient cadences, we know ourselves to be at the threshold with all your creatures in heaven and on earth, everyone from rabbits and parrots to angels and seraphim . . . That is how it is when we praise you. We join the angels in praise, and we keep our feet in time and place . . . awed to heaven, rooted in earth. We are daily stretched between communion with you and our bodied lives, spent but alive, summoned and cherished but stretched between . . ."

In the name of the One whose body, stretched between heaven and earth, was broken for us, and through whom our praise this and every day is raised to You – God of creation, God of astounding love.

Amen.