

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Psalm 136

Title: “God Is Holding Your Life:

One of my best friends is Norwegian. So I called him a few months ago with a joke I’d heard. “Paal, do you know why Norwegians can’t tell a joke--timing.” I love to tease my friends. There is such joy in it. But I also appreciate my friend, Paal’s, deep kindness with the things of nature. He’ll take a spider outside rather than smash it in the house. When toads or other creatures get trapped in his basement window wells, he’ll put a board down to give them something to climb up. He loves all of God’s creatures and tends to them as if they were his own dear child.

Of course, as a result of his love of nature we’ve had our tensions when we’ve discussed hunting. I’ve had to remind him that someone has to kill the chicken he’s eating or the cow whose leather he’s wearing, but still I respect and appreciate him for his deep sensitivity to the things of God’s creation, and I have told him so. He has the kind of reverence for God’s creatures from which I can learn. So while I find joy in teasing him, I also find joy in recognizing what I value in him.

There is joy in affirming the people we care about, reminding them of the good in them, the things we appreciate about them, the things for which we are grateful. That--as much as the teasing--is a deeper reminder of our affection for them.

The same goes for family. One of the key things Lynn and I learned in our experience with Marriage Enrichment as a participating couple and then later as certified leaders is the need to affirm what we appreciate about our spouses. It’s very easy to get into the rut of daily life and the routines of getting by in life and forget to tell each other what it is we appreciate about them. When we forget to offer gratitude for the people who are important to us, we lose something, something of the joy of having a treasured relationship.

I think the same can be said for God. We lose something when we forget to recognize that for which we are grateful to God. The psalms, however, do not slip into forgetfulness. In fact, the psalm we just read is a song of gratitude for God’s involvement in the life of the people of Israel. Singing gratitude for the gift of creation for which God alone is responsible: the gift of heaven, the sun, the moon, the stars—the great lights. All of it is a reminder, sings the psalmist, that God’s steadfast love endures forever.

But it’s not just creation for which there is gratitude, but rather God’s direct involvement

with the lives of the people. God freed them from oppression and gave them life beyond slavery. And somehow those who oppressed them and those who might oppress them in the future lost their grip on power because God's steadfast love endures forever.

Over and over again, it is said that all the good that has happened to them is the result of God's steadfast love.

There are two stories I want to share today that came to mind as I listened to the psalm remind us to give thanks to the Lord for God is good.

The first I heard from Woodie White. Woodie was a pastor in our conference, the Detroit Conference of the UMC, who because of his giftedness was elected bishop in 1984 and went on to serve as bishop to the Illinois area and then the Indiana area from which he retired in 2004. He is now bishop in residence at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia.

Woodie shared an experience of one of the most difficult moments he ever faced. He was sitting at home in his easy chair, watching a football game, when he received a phone call.

"Woodie! Woodie!" his sister screamed hysterically. "You better come quick! Something has happened to mother!"

White left at once on the long drive to his mother's house. "What possibly could have happened?" he wondered as he drove. Was it a heart attack? A stroke? An accident? Had she fallen and broken a hip? Why was his sister so hysterical?

He was frightened and tried to prepare himself--but nothing could have prepared him for what he found. His seventy-three year old mother had been violently attacked. Someone had broken into her home and brutally beaten her, robbed her and physically abused her. Her face was bruised and bloody. Her clothes were torn. Her eyes were nearly swollen shut. Bishop White could not believe what he was seeing.

At first he stood in a state of shock. Then he ran to her, threw his arms around her, and began to cry. And then something strange and special happened. As he was holding his mother, he detected a familiar aroma.

"Mother," he said, "What is that I'm smelling?"

"It's fried chicken, son. I thought you might be hungry after your long drive."

Woodie broke into tears again and hugged her tightly. She looked up at him, her face aglow, "Son," she said, "I'll tell you something, and I don't want you to ever forget it: "God is still good! God is still good! God is still good!"

I can hear the psalmist's reply, "for his steadfast love endures forever."

The second story comes from an email a neighbor of ours sent last week. I checked a couple of fact-checking sites and learned that it's a true story. One day a teacher asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed in the papers.

That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday she gave each student his or her list. Before long, the

entire class was smiling. 'Really?' she heard whispered. 'I never knew that I meant anything to anyone!' and, 'I didn't know others liked me so much,' were most of the comments.

No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. She never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another. That group of students moved on.

Years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam and his teacher attended the funeral of that special student. She had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. He looked so handsome, so mature. The church was packed with his friends. One by one those who loved him took a last walk by the coffin. The teacher was the last one to bless the coffin.

As she stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to her. 'Were you Mark's math teacher?' he asked. She nodded: 'yes.' Then he said: 'Mark talked about you a lot.'

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates went together to a luncheon. Mark's mother and father were there, obviously waiting to speak with his teacher.

'We want to show you something,' his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket 'They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it.'

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. 'Thank you so much for doing that,' Mark's mother said. 'As you can see, Mark treasured it.'

All of Mark's former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, 'I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home.'

Chuck's wife said, 'Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album.'

'I have mine too,' Marilyn said. 'It's in my diary'

Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. 'I carry this with me at all times,' Vicki said and without batting an eyelash, she continued: 'I think we all saved our lists'

That's when the teacher finally sat down and cried. She cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again.

The email goes on...

The density of people in society is so thick that we forget that life will end one day. And we don't know when that one day will be. So please, tell the

people you love and care for, that they are special and important. Tell them, before it is too late. If you've received this, it is because someone cares for you and it means there is probably at least someone for whom you care.

I don't know why exactly but I can hear the psalm in this: "for his steadfast love endures forever." There is just something about remembering the gifts of God in nature, in our own history with God, in the people we love, in all the ways in which God is present with us and to us--yet not just in the remembering but also speaking that remembrance. Writing it down, speaking it, making it known to someone besides ourselves that we've noticed, that we are grateful, that it matters to us, that God matters to us.

Consider, if you will, spending some time being grateful for God this week. Remember the ways in which God has gifted you throughout your life. In spite of the trials that come, God is still good, for his steadfast love endures forever. You might do that by spending time with the psalm and the bulletin insert. Give thanks and praise to God for all that is past, all that you now enjoy and all that God will provide in the future.

Remember, too--if you will--those around you. Consider telling them why you are grateful for them, what it is about them you appreciate. Let them know.

As we grow in our love for God and our neighbors, seeing the good and naming it, changes us for the better. Living with a spirit of being grateful, looking for ways to give thanks to God and our neighbors changes us. It reminds us that even when there is pain in life God is still good, and that alone can lift us out of the gloom of whatever situation in which we might find ourselves. Thanks and praise gives us hope.

Because as the Liberians say...

God is good
All the time
All the time
God is good.