

## **“Just Praise”**

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11    Mark 4:26-29**

One of my favorite Bible verses is Proverbs 4:7. “The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom.” We could just as well say this morning: “the beginning of praise is this: just praise!” This might feel thrilling or motivating, but it certainly doesn’t answer the next hundred questions that leap to mind. How? How often? What exactly is praise? What does good praise look like? Is there such a thing as bad praise? Can we praise wrong? We might find some clarity by listening to Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> century nun and mystic. She wanted to help people deepen their spiritual lives, to journey as “servants of love.” She compares our spiritual life to a garden. It starts out full of weeds with difficult soil. It is Jesus who pulls the weeds and who plants the good seed. Our task is to cultivate the garden so that the good seed sprouts and grows.<sup>1</sup>

Teresa focuses on the task of watering the garden. I know all you gardeners are familiar with how vital, how time consuming, and how complicated that can get. Teresa says that there are four different ways to water the garden and she compares these to four degrees of prayer. Even though she was talking about prayer, it can apply it to praise, too.

First, you can draw water from a well. It takes a lot of work travelling, getting water from deep down, raising it up, carrying it to the garden, and repeating the process (especially when the well runs dry). Teresa says this is like all the work it takes to find the words to pray and praise when your mind is filled with distractions, either of what’s happening around you or of thoughts of your past. Your focus shifts so often that it can even be painful. When we keep praying, when we keep praising even though it’s hard, God supports us in every step we take.

In the second degree of prayer and praise, you use a water wheel and aqueducts. This requires the gardener to turn a crank to get the water going, but it doesn’t require constant work. You end up with more water for less effort. Teresa calls this “the prayer of quiet.” Now we find joy simply in the calm and solitude in God’s presence. Rather than pouring out words, we aren’t preoccupied with saying “yes” and “no” to different thoughts. We simply say “yes” to God in silence. We may even long for God to prune away flowers so better ones can blossom.

In the third degree of prayer and praise, you find water in a nearby stream. Here, with irrigation, still less work is required to water the garden. Teresa calls this prayer “a sleep of the faculties.” Your intellect, your will, your memory - it’s not that they stop working or stop existing. They just stand in awe of God. Things of this world that once seemed tempting pale in comparison with this praise, this closeness, this communion. It’s not about speaking or being silent. Teresa describes this time as “glorious foolishness, a heavenly madness where the true wisdom is learned.” This praise is as giddy in God’s love as a giggling schoolgirl. She says you, “utter many words here in praise of God without thinking them up.” You want to praise so much that your voice longs to join others. Joy resounds in works of service. It’s a “union of the whole

soul with God” that lets your sense of reason, your will, your self engage some of what’s happening so you can rejoice in what God is doing.

In the fourth degree, the garden is watered by rain. Each of the other kinds of prayer involved some work on your part, but this one doesn’t. The much-needed water comes as an outpouring of God’s grace. Teresa reminds us that our souls are citizens of heaven – that we are forever sojourning on earth. Our souls feel a pain, a homesickness of longing to be in heaven. In this fourth degree, the homesickness is gone. The senses are completely overcome by the moment. It’s a communion with God’s glory – feeling as one with God. This is joy beyond understanding, beyond words. Teresa doesn’t even pretend to understand what kind of prayer brings us to this holy place. But she is confident that, “this heavenly water, this magnificent favor from the Lord, always leaves great fruits in the soul.”

This is what it means to pray and praise: words, silence, transcendence, and communion with God. It’s not about finding the right style or schedule to pray and praise – it’s about understanding every moment as an act of prayer and praise. Our parable this morning is sometimes called “the Parable of the Growing Seed.” Many of Jesus’s parables offer messages that are radical and challenging like the Good Samaritan or the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard where everyone gets paid a full day’s wage no matter how many hours they worked. The Parable of the Growing Seed isn’t controversial, though. It’s pretty much just the way that things are. You plant seeds, they grow, and you harvest when it’s time. You don’t understand or control all the ins and outs of what happens. You do your best and get a result. If this parable is just a retelling of something that happens every day, how is it like the kingdom of God?

Jumping over to the Isaiah, the passage might seem kind of familiar. That’s because it’s what Jesus read when he spoke at the synagogue in Nazareth. He said he was the one who was anointed to bring good news to so many people who were being unjustly harmed and rejected. His good news wasn’t a simple removal of the things that were hurting people. It was a complete reversal. Those who grieve would be comforted, but not just comforted – even the clothing of mourning would be transformed into clothing of gladness. Their spirits would be lifted from exhaustion to praise.

Now the image shifts – it’s not about changing the appearance. The people who have been struggling to survive will be remade as oaks, righteous, strong, and unmistakable. The planting of all of these people will show all the world the glory of the Lord. This reworking for good doesn’t stop with those who had suffered. It extends in the good works of their lives, the rebuilding and renewal of the destruction they find around them. These people, now lifted up, don’t just work for justice. They have clarity: all of this is God’s doing. How could they do anything but rejoice? Adorned with salvation and righteousness, they radiate more joy than a bride and groom on their wedding day.

The renewal is so profound that people watching from the outside are convinced they must be “a people whom the Lord has blessed.” God has made all things new. Isaiah tells us: “as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” Sound familiar? It’s just like the Parable of the Growing Seed. We show up, we do our part, we do our best, but the earth produces of itself. Beyond our understanding, the plants come to life and bear fruit. Righteousness and praise work the same way. God calls forth our desire to pray and worship, our striving to do good where we can, our love of Jesus. That’s how the kingdom works – it’s grace first and grace last. Don’t get tripped up in questions and hesitations. It really is true: the beginning of praise is this: just praise. God’s got us every step of the way. May we live into God’s blessings and the possibilities all around us. Amen.

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