

## Servant Worship

Psalm 116:1-19

The season of Lent is drawing to a close. On Ash Wednesday we said that Lent is not primarily a period when we "don't do this" or "don't do that." Rather it's a time of self-denial and self-discipline during which we place greater emphasis upon the spiritual and less upon the material. It's a matter of adding as well as subtracting.

If we've been serious at all, our aim during the past five weeks has been giving God greater priority in our daily lives.

Our attention this evening is on Psalm 116 which combines elements of true worship with the love of service: worship that induces and inspires. Notice how the Psalm begins: "I love the Lord because ..." (v. 1). Then follows a list of what hymn writer John Newton called the "many dangers, toils and snares" that the Psalmist had coped with and the spiritual depths from which he had been drawn.

His journey, like ours, had been a real world journey marked by affliction, fear, and even a brush with death. Yet by God's amazing grace he came through, and the experience taught him the deeper meaning of a strong personal relationship with God which eventually grew into a life of gratitude and praise.

What concerned the Psalmist in the end was this persistent question: How can I ever repay God? In light of all the benefits and blessings he'd received, what can he be or do to even up the score? His answer was to take three steps:

Step 1: "I will take ..." (v. 13a). The best way to thank God for what He has done for us is to receive it. We are empty vessels, and to be what he wants us to be and to have what he wants us to have, we must open ourselves to his love in our lives. And that love is most happy when it sees its reflection in the person who receives it.

In Luke 15:7 we read, "... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (RSV). It's true that our Christian worship involves giving, but more important in the eyes of God is when we take free gift offered eagerly to us.

Set before us this evening are the sacramental symbols of bread and wine. In a moment we'll take them, and when we do our action will signify that inwardly we resolve to make God's love and will the guiding and molding factors in our common life. "I will take."

Step 2: "I will call ..." (v. 13b). There's nothing unusual in calling God's name. People do it every day, sometimes in blasphemy, sometimes in defiance, sometimes in utter faithlessness. But note how the Psalmist puts it: "I will call on the name of the Lord."

By this he means two-way communication with God. And the highest form of this dialog is prayer. Professor Paul Lehmann of Princeton Theological Seminary once declared that: "Prayer is that meeting with God and man in which each is exposed to the other as he is."

God's nature is known to us in all he has given us. God's integrity is not at stake. But our integrity is, because what we pray and how we pray tells God who we are. Rev. John Kelman, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, said, "It will generally be found that a man's most distinguishing feature lies in the thing for which he has most frequently prayed."<sup>1</sup>

If we're sincere and honest in our requests, we open windows and doors that God can use to get to us. And then something can happen. Unfortunately, we try to mold his will to our will instead of bending our will to his. But the Psalmist called the name of the Lord. He called God in to his human situation, and in so doing he helped bring about the answer to his prayers.

Moreover, he said he would perform his devotion "in the presence of all his people" (v. 14b). This is what Christians mean and do when we say, "Our Father." None of us should ever feel we're the only ones who pray or know how to pray.

Behind us are the Christians of ages past (what the writer to the Hebrews called "a cloud of witnesses"). We are heirs of their faith and devotion. When we call upon God in prayer, we join a great fellowship who share together in both receiving and giving. "I will call."

Step 3: "I will offer ..." (v. 17). In view of what he has been given and what he has been able to say, the Psalmist says, "I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving" (v. 17b). Which sounds easy and we think we do that every day. But the routine "Thank you " we offer occasionally is easy, kind of like something that rolls off the tongue without much thought before or after.

The Psalmist's idea of thanksgiving was much, much more: it had in it the element of sacrifice. True, he remembered what God had done for him. And he, like us, could name the beauty of the earth, the glory of the seasons, the food and clothes we take for granted.

But the Psalmist's thanksgiving was basically for who God is. But thanking God for who He is is not entirely complete until who God is - is claimed by us and we invite God to become the essence of our way of life.

Whatever else God is, He is love. And when the Psalmist says "I love the Lord because ..." it means that God's love displaces in the Psalmist all traces of self-love which allows room for sacrifice. To repay God for his love and blessings in this way, the believer subordinates his life to God's will and purpose. And this is costly.

But then, "Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by R. J. Wedderspoon in "Intercession" in Expository Times, LVII, 1, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts, 1674-1748)