

## FIVE KERNELS OF PRAISE

### Psalm 100 (ESV)

The observance of Thanksgiving is a tradition that we hold near to our hearts as Americans. The tradition of gathering together with friends and family for Thanksgiving began almost 400 years ago at Plymouth Colony. The Pilgrims uprooted themselves and sailed for America on the Mayflower seeking religious freedom and a new way of life for their families. Through what they endured; it is amazing that we ever came to have this holiday at all. First, instead of landing in Virginia where others from England had already established settlements, the Mayflower was blown off course and landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts just in time for winter to set in. What ensued next was enough to break the will of even the strongest of people, terrible storms and sickness ravaged the settlers. Gov. William Bradford described this first winter as, “That which was most sad and lamentable, was that in two- or three-months’ time, half of the company had died.” He went on to describe how that sometimes two to three people died each day. Shelter from the harsh winter was scant as the Pilgrims spent their time digging seven times as many graves for their dead as they built homes for the living. When the ship arrived, which was to bring food for their relief they found that while it brought 35 more mouths to feed it brought not an ounce of provisions. The very fact that the tradition of Thanksgiving originated from this band of beaten brothers is amazing indeed!

Yet, in 1621, Edward Winslow, one of the fifty or so members of the Plymouth Colony wrote these words describing the first Thanksgiving. “Our harvest of corn came in well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn and our barley crop was also good... And although our harvests are not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish that you could be partakers of our plenty.

Wanting never to forget how God delivered them from their want the Pilgrims and their ancestors developed a tradition to remember the hard times from which they had been delivered. Whenever the Pilgrims gathered for a dinner of “thanksgiving” they had a custom of placing five kernels of corn upon an empty plate before the meal was served. Each member of the family would pick up a kernel and tell that for which they were thankful. This was a reminder to them how during that first winter at Plymouth, food was so scarce that each individual was rationed only five kernels of corn each day.” ([http://www.stlukes.net/Thanksgiving\\_Day\\_Sermon\\_C\\_2001.html](http://www.stlukes.net/Thanksgiving_Day_Sermon_C_2001.html))

It is rare for me to preach on the Psalms, but in light of the fact that we will be celebrating Thanksgiving this coming Thursday, it seems quite fitting for us to look at this Psalm of Praise. Psalm 100 is one of the most familiar of the songs of praise in the Bible and the source of some of our most beloved songs of worship. The hymn tune “Old Hundredth” pays homage to the psalm and is used in many congregations as the tune for the Doxology. The psalm itself is an invitation to sing: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (v. 1-2) A “joyful noise” was the appropriate greeting for a monarch in the ancient world, and, in this case, it is “all the earth” that cries out in joy at the presence of the Creator. It’s the kind of joyful noise we might make when we enter the front door of the family home after a long absence; the excited cry of being home at last. When entering the gates of the Lord, those excited cries then turn to songs of worship.

If we consider the place where we worship as our church “home,” this opening couple of verses has a lot to say to us.

- Do we make a “joyful noise” when we come to worship, or do we settle for sighs of boredom or the sharp sound of complaint?
- Do we worship the Lord with “gladness,” or do we do so out of obligation?
- Do we come into his presence with singing, or are we largely silent?

If worship is designed to praise God in God’s presence, *it ought to be joyful!* Your church doors may not look like an ancient gate or the front door to home but entering through them should be cause for praise and thanksgiving. When we worship, it’s a noise that should shake the whole earth!

Let me tell you what I experience Sunday after Sunday as the sanctuary begins to fill for worship. I see many checking in with one another catching up with their week, sharing joys and some sorrows. I hear happy greetings – people are genuinely glad to see one another and happy to be here. While some of you may come out of obligation, I never get that feeling. This atmosphere continues during our time of greeting, and in fact many Sundays, Lauren and I hesitate to move forward as she carries in the light of Christ. I know I tease you a lot about singing songs of praise with such serious faces, but I also know this is from habit and concentration.

In looking back at our opening story from the first Thanksgiving and the five kernels of corn as a tool for giving thanks, how does our Scripture, Psalm 100 measure up? In these 5 short verses do we learn enough about the character of God to give us reason to praise Him? I think we do.

The first four verses focus strongly on giving God praise. It is by the very character of God alone that we find the reason for joyful worship. “Know that the LORD, he is God,” says the psalmist. “It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise!” (vs. 3-4) Entering through the doors of the Lord’s dwelling place, just like entering the doors of our childhood home, reminds us of who we are and from whence we came. Outside we try to make a name for ourselves, making up our identity from our vocation, our bank account, our friendships and accomplishments. But inside the walls of God’s presence, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We are “the sheep of his pasture,” and it is God’s presence that provides us protection and care better than anything or anyone ever could. Worship reminds us that our identity begins and ends with God, the one who made us and cares for us.

*Worship also shapes our worldview.* If God is the one who made us all, then we also find our identity with the people of “all the earth.” (vs. 1) Worship can push us beyond the boundaries of race and nationality and help us to recognize that we are not called to be at home with just *our* people, but with *all* God’s people. The gates of God’s presence are wide open to a multitude of travelers coming from all over the place, all made to be focused on reflecting the image of God within them, rather than reflecting on their differences. They’re called to join in making a “joyful noise,” a cacophony of sounds in many languages, but all giving worship to God. Worship is the universal language of God’s world, and, no matter where we call home, we’re called to join together in thanks and praise. (Homiletics Online, Psalm 100, 2014)

Verse 5 commands us that we are to praise God because, “The LORD is good.” Just like our VBS kids learned this summer, God is Good!! I will never hear that phrase quite the same way after VBS 2019!! I can still clearly hear Wesley’s voice with the emphasis made on the word good! Not only do we praise God because God is good, we especially praise God because he has a “steadfast love that endures forever...”. (vs.5) God does not just ‘hangout’ out with us when we are on our best behavior – no. God comes even closer to us in those times when we struggle; just like the Father in the following story:

At dinner one evening Tommy misbehaved. His father, always a strict disciplinarian, reprimanded him saying, “Tommy, if you do not behave you will be sent to your room!” Naturally, Tommy did not listen. Ordered from the room, he heard his father’s last words: “And there will be no more food for you tonight!”

Later, in bed, Tommy’s thoughts of his behavior began to bother him. He was hungry. He couldn’t remember every having felt more alone or alienated. He began to cry. Then he heard a noise on the stairs. Footsteps came closer to his room. His door opened and his father came in. Closing the door, he came over to Tommy’s bed and said, “I love you, Son, and I’ve come to spend the night with you.” The love this father had for his child is the same love Christ has for us; a steadfast, unwavering, persistent and committed love that endures forever! Forever!!

Finally, we are to praise God because his love lasts forever, “his faithfulness to all generations”. (vs. 5) We praise God because God is good, and we give thanks because God’s love, grace and faithfulness have extended across the generations, even when God’s people sometimes forget their identity. When “the sheep of his pasture” are wandering, God is still the shepherd who will keep searching until all of them are back in the fold (Luke 15:1-7). The gate remains open because the gatekeeper wants his sheep to come in and live an abundant life (John 10:7-10).

We live in a world that is quick to criticize and find fault. We get bogged down in negativity and despair and find it difficult to remember to be thankful and praise others. This is probably the reason I love it when the news channels focus on today’s heroes in their respective communities. Praise is something we could all use a lot more of, isn’t it? It feels good to be praised. It also feels good to bring a word of praise to someone else, to see a face light up with delight that “we noticed.”

Business-management experts have picked up on this. A best-selling business book, *The One-Minute Manager*, recommends “one-minute praisings” by which bosses shower their employees with compliments. We all know children need regular praise if they are to flourish. Too many children from troubled families are starved for praise.

Praise is the universal lubricant for the machine of human society. A few moments spent telling friends or neighbors what they’ve done right is time well spent. What we’re about in the church sanctuary is something similar. Yet, there is a key difference between this setting and every other. Here, we’re praising God.

On the face of it, that seems to be pointless. Of all the personalities in the universe, God is the one who shouldn’t need praise. What could the “immortal, invisible, God only wise” possibly want with our humble hymns and anthems?

We don't praise God because God needs it. We praise God because there's something in us that is incomplete, unsatisfied, unfulfilled, and our praise to God helps us to recognize and be thankful for the ways God makes us complete.

In a similar vein new research is showing that people who count their blessings may find themselves sleeping better, exercising more and caring more about others. People who remind themselves of the things they are grateful for – people who count their blessings one by one, consciously, every day – show significant improvements in mental health, and even in some aspects of physical health. And these results appear to be true whether you are a healthy college student or an older person with an incurable disease, according to research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Psalm 100 encourages us to sing praises to God and this season of Thanksgiving encourages us to count our blessings. It's all good, and in the long run you and I reap the benefits 100-fold.

Fulton Oursler tells of his old nurse, who was born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland and who attended the birth of his mother and his own birth. She taught him the greatest lesson in giving thanks and finding contentment. "I remember her as she sat at the kitchen table in our house; the hard, old brown hand folded across her starched apron, the glistening eyes, and the husky old whispering voice, saying, "Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles." "Anna," I asked, "what's a vittle?" "It's what I've got to eat and drink, that's vittles." But you'd get your vittles whether you thanked the Lord or not." "Sure," she responded, "but it makes everything taste better to be thankful."

As you gather round your Thanksgiving tables this week, may your prayers of thanks bring an added richness to the bounty on your tables. And if you are so led, start a new tradition by serving each person 5 kernels of corn!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.