

Praise God
Psalm 100
March 1 2015

Last Sunday evening, after a fabulous Family Room worship service right here, (which by the way, included Muppets, fabulous music, and chocolate -- so if you missed it, all I can say is 'what were you thinking?')

Anyway -- after that, like many of you, I went home, curled up on the couch in my snuggie, and turned on the Oscars.

This was a year when I felt like I hadn't really entirely done my homework; I haven't seen *Birdman*, or *Boyhood*, or *Whiplash*, so it felt a little like those bad dreams where you walk into a classroom and the teacher's giving the final exam but you forgot to go to class all semester.

But even so, even with my level of ignorance, I loved watching -- in all honesty, I just love the acceptance speeches, especially for things like documentary short feature, where you've maybe never heard of this director, but they've put their whole life into this film.

The speeches do, though, always start off the same. You know how it goes.

"I'd like to thank the Academy."

You can pretty much tune the first few words out.

Which is why Lonnie Lynn's acceptance speech for best song caught me off guard right away.

He's the rapper who wrote '*Glory*' along with John Legend, his stage name is Common, and he stepped up, took a breath, and said "I'd like to thank God that lives in us all."

And you know, it got me.

One simple sentence, one sentence that reminded all of us listening that One God lives in us all.

A simple sentence that praised that One God first before anyone else.

First, praise God.

That's right, I thought.

That's the right order of things. First, praise God.

So that's what I'm talking about today. Praising God.

Before everything else, praising God.

But I'll tell you what.

All of our friends here from Pivot Ministries get a free pass on this sermon.

I don't think you guys need it.

In fact, you can just use these next few minutes to relax, catch up on some sleep, stretch out on the pews.

Because what I've noticed is that in your ministry, you *always* first praise God.

Whenever I've been at your place,

and whenever you're here in this place,

I've seen that *before anything else* you first praise God.

In song and in prayer, in word and in testimony,

always I have seen that you first praise God.

We've heard it today,

we see it in your faces.

So I don't know if *you* need this sermon.

But I know I do.

Because I have a confession to make.

The truth is, I've sometimes struggled with this idea that we're supposed to praise God.

I know that sounds odd.

Of course we're supposed to praise God.

I grew up singing the same Doxology we sing most every Sunday here,

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

That's pretty clear.

And in fact, of all the things the Bible tells us to do --

love one another,

do the right thing,

pray, pray and pray some more --

of all things things it says to do, the one it tells us to do most is

praise God.

I asked Emily to read Psalm 100, because it tells us to praise God:

enter God's gates with thanksgiving and God's courts with praise, it says.

But I could just as easily have had her read Psalm 8, or 95, or 96, or 150, or a zillion others, which all say 'Praise the Lord' ...

Or Acts 2, where it says Christ's first followers spent all day every day praising God, or any of the 400 and some other places where what God's people do is praise God, and tell us to do the same.

It's pretty clear. Praise God. First, praise God.

In the morning, in the evening, praise God every time of day.

So why have I struggled with it?

Well, to be honest, I would just get stuck on the *why*.

I mean, *why* would God want us to praise God?

Why would God *need* us to praise God?

Here's what I mean:

Here's a story. (It was zipping around online this week). A few days ago, Somewhere in Utah, I think it was,

a young woman went into a bridal store to pick out a wedding dress.

She didn't have a ton of money; She and her fiancé had been saving up,

because those wedding gowns aren't cheap --

but when she went up to the counter with the dress she'd finally picked,

she was told it was already paid for.

An anonymous donor, Someone else in the store, observing all this, had quietly paid the bill,

and had then slipped away, telling the cashier "don't tell her who it was.

I don't need to be thanked."

And where I always got stuck on this praise thing was thinking --

isn't God kind of like the ultimate anonymous donor,

Isn't God the kind observant giver of all good things,

who surely doesn't need to be thanked?

God doesn't do good stuff to be thanked, right,
God does good stuff because -- God's a good God.

Little kids need praise to keep doing good.
But God's definitely not a little kid.
God is the be-all and end-all, within and around us.
God surely doesn't need our praise to keep being God.

This is where I kept getting stuck.

Then I read something that messed me up even more.
I read an essay by a pastor that said
"You need to praise God because, just like any of us would be,
God's more likely to bestow favors on those who speak kindly to God."
In other words, God's only human? What?
Well, that really couldn't be right.

Surely it can't be that God needs our praise in order to treat us nice.
And surely God doesn't need our praise in order to keep on being God.
God's not mean, and God's not insecure.

Right?
God is ... God is *Love*.

So why praise? Why start with praise?
Why, in the words of that beautiful Psalm, do we enter God's gates with thanksgiving
and God's courts with praise.
Why do we sing *Worthy is your name*.
If God doesn't need our praise,
then why is it made so very clear that we are *meant* to praise.

Because God is love,
and God's wish for us is only ever joy.
And God knows -- better than we know ourselves,
better than I seemed to know --
that if we live with praise, we *will* live in joy.

That to be a person of praise is to be a person of hope.
That to enter into each day with thanksgiving, each moment with praise,
is to open yourself up to all is that good and all that is possible.
God doesn't ask us to praise because *God* needs it.
God asks us to praise because *we* need it.

It's we who need to enter into each day amazed by beauty,
captivated by blessing.
It's we who need to live in gratitude, open-mouthed with awe.
Praising God, praising the God of life and love,
not because God needs us to,
but for our own sake God wants us to.

This does not mean living blind to sorrow, our own or the world's.
This does mean pretending the darkness is not there.
But it does mean living with eyes wide open to what is good and true and worthy of
praise.

The writer Kate Braestrup, who has preached from this pulpit,
and whose life, as we learned, has been touched by great sorrow,
Kate wrote this about why we need to praise God all the time:

"True gratitude is the purest expression of joy. Ungrateful people—you may have met a few—are not happy people.

*If we humans were making good use of our consciousness,
we would wander around in a flabbergasted daze of gratitude all the time,
...Praying thank you, thank you, thank you isn't silly or irrational.*

*Indeed, it strikes me as the most reasonable response possible for anyone faced with
the impossible facts of a good meal, love, and even [simply] being."*

And so, she says, quoting:

*"Sing praises to the Lord with heart and soul.
Singing heart, embrace the spirit
The notes play, like the stars that sparkle
Joyously around the name of the Lord."*

Sing praises to the Lord with heart and soul.
Praise, first.

Before all else, praise.

So I'm going to give you a little homework.
And you may feel silly at first,
but I guarantee that if you push past silly
what you will truly feel is better.
More joyful, more peaceful, more connected to a loving God.

All you have to do is this.

The next time something makes you smile, whisper to yourself 'praise God.'

The next time you see something beautiful --

whether it's a cardinal on a snowy tree branch, or the smile of a small child - whisper to yourself 'praise God.'

The next time you receive kindness, say praise God,
and when you find you have been kind, praise God.

The next time you feel loved, praise God,
and when you love, praise God.

And even in the lonely moments, the dark moments,
even more so then, praise God,

because there is no moment where you are alone,
and there is no dark moment where the light does not shine.

Praise God! Amen.