

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 28, 2024

Totality

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a powerful Psalm we have appointed for us today. Allow me to read it again with my own emphasis:

All your works...

All your faithful...

shall speak...

make known to **all** people

The LORD is faithful in **all** his words,
and gracious in **all** his deeds.

The LORD upholds **all** who are falling
and raises up **all** who are bowed down.

The eyes of **all** look to you...

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of **every living thing**.

The LORD is just in **all** his ways
and kind in **all** his doings.

The LORD is near to **all** who call on him,
to **all** who call on him in truth.

Now, given my emphasis, did you notice a theme in the psalm? It seems focused on totality. The word all, or a similar phrase, occurs 13 times in these verses. All works. All deeds. The eyes of All. All ways. All doings. All who call. And more. There is no exception, no asterisk, no "except in these conditions" clause. This psalm has one main intent: to amplify the glory and majesty of God. We are meant to leave this passage feeling like God is BIG. Certainly bigger than us!

You've likely encountered this emphasis before. It's a popular one in Christianity. A great and glorious God, above all and over all. The problem with over emphasizing this is that it tends to move us towards a theology of glory. And focusing on God's glory often leads to the understanding that God is only present when good things are

happening. It's hard for us to see God as present and powerful when we are struggling. But even more, it's easier for us to believe that God is somehow more present with those who are doing well.

Psalm 145 destroys this theology. Somehow the LORD is faithful in "all the LORD's words" and gracious in "all deeds." God is "just in all God's ways," and "kind in all God's doings." All? Even through a pandemic? The death of a loved one? In the midst of a growing climate crisis? Suffering a genocide? All? Really?

It's healthy, and quite important, to read this passage with skepticism. If you've ever felt like God has abandoned you, you might not want to hear scriptures like "even when my mother and father have forsaken me." If you've ever felt weak or helpless, you probably don't want to hear "they shall run, and not faint!"

A God who is faithful matters when you feel God is blessing everyone but you. A God who "satisfies the desire of every living thing" matters when you see desperation and scarcity in your community. A God who "is near" matters when you feel so distant from divinity. This passage might be descriptive of glimpses that the psalmist may have felt over time.

It might also be an affirmation, recited into the mirror. Sometimes we have to believe things that do not yet exist. Or as Solange said, "I saw things I imagined." What does the God of your imagination look like? How might you characterize God?

Let's push this theme of totality to our Gospel text for today too. We don't have the blatant language of "all" that we find in the Psalm. But we do see the total power of God on display in ways that are more caring than glorious.

Jesus is travelling around, healing people and teaching them. He is restoring people to total wholeness – physical, social, and spiritual. Jesus is using the totality of his power to bring people into righteousness, helping them to be, more completely, who God made them to be. In the midst of healing and teaching Jesus, who can turn stones into bread, sees the crowd's hunger.

Taking five loaves and two fishes, Jesus provides for the totality of the crowd. God's providence is great enough for all. Not only that, but there are twelve baskets left over. God's providence is an overabundance! Like Christ's first miracle in Cana, more of the very best wine than would ever be necessary is created when the need was known, an overabundance!

Then comes the evening. The disciples are being tossed about on the storm swept sea. And who comes walking up to the boat saying, “It is I; do not be afraid”? Jesus, who’s power and control is total. Jesus meets the disciples in the middle of the storm, in the midst of their terror. Just as Jesus met the crowds in the midst of their hunger, estrangement, and suffering.

What amazing grace that God, whose power and control is total, is so willing to meet us where we’re at. How beautiful is God’s abundant providence towards us! Whatever our needs, God wants to meet them. Wherever we might find ourselves, God meets us there!

The Psalmist’s proclamation of God’s all-encompassing love and power is a bold and necessary counterpoint to our often-limited understanding of the divine. In a world marked by suffering and uncertainty, it is easy to question the presence and goodness of God. Yet, the Psalm insists on a God who is always present, always loving, and always capable. This is a God who is not confined by human limitations or expectations.

The Gospel narrative further reinforces this theme of divine totality. Jesus, the embodiment of God’s love, demonstrates through his miracles and compassion that God’s power is limitless and God’s mercy is boundless. The feeding of the five thousand and the calming of the storm reveal a God who is not only concerned with spiritual well-being but also with the tangible needs of humanity. In the face of doubt and despair, we are called to embrace the radical assertion of the Psalm: God is indeed faithful, gracious, just, and kind in all things, to all people, at all times.

Have you ever had such an experience? The grandeur of God, yet also the intimacy of God. Experiencing the mountains or the beach often express the glory of God to me. The sheer size of the horizon makes me wonder about the greatness of God. And yet, I have known the presence of God at a death bed. Around the dinner table. In a comforting embrace.

Perhaps you haven’t had such an experience, and that’s okay too. But I want all of us to remember the totality of God’s love for us. The complete and unconditional *agape* love that God in Christ has shown us, is completely without limits. You are loved...in your totality. Every fiber of your being, every hair on your head...you are loved. What might it mean to live that out? Amen.