

Give Thanks for Those We Remember

Psalm 107

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational Church

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Walter Brueggemann writes that “Psalm 107 is the fullest, clearest example of a song of thanksgiving.” The psalm opens with a “summons to thanks that imagines” God’s people gathering home. Next are four case studies: people find themselves in trouble, they cry out to God, who delivers them, and they respond with thanksgiving. And finally the psalm ends with a statement of God’s sovereignty. The overarching theme of this psalm is that the people are grateful for God’s steadfast love.

Hear now this ancient song of thanksgiving.

Psalm 107

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those God redeemed from trouble and gathered in
from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress;
God led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank the Lord for steadfast love, for God’s wonderful works to humankind.
For God satisfies the thirsty, and fills the hungry with good things.

Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons,
for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most
High.
Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor; they fell down, with no one to help.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress;
God brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder.
Let them thank the Lord for steadfast love, for God’s wonderful works to humankind.
For God shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron.

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured
affliction;
they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress;
God sent out God’s word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.

Let them thank the Lord for steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of God's deeds with songs of joy.

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord, God's wondrous works in the deep.
For God commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away
in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God brought them out from their
distress;
God made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet, and God brought them to their desired
haven.
Let them thank the Lord for steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind.
Let them extol God in the congregation of the people, and praise God in the assembly of
the elders.

The Lord turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground,
a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.
The Lord turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water.
And there God lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in;
they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield.
By God's blessing they multiply greatly, and God does not let their cattle decrease.
When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,
the Lord pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes;
but raises up the needy out of distress, and makes their families like flocks.
The upright see it and are glad; and all wickedness stops its mouth.
Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the
Lord.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Positive psychologist Derrick Carpenter writes, "The benefits of practicing gratitude are nearly endless. People who regularly practice gratitude by taking time to notice and reflect upon the things they're thankful for experience more positive emotions, feel more alive, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems."

For the month of November we are Giving Thanks in our worship. This year, let's not save thanksgiving for one holiday, let's spend the month practicing gratitude. I invite you to take on some special practice this month. Maybe every day you will write a thank you note or

start a gratitude journal or post on social media something you are grateful for or simply say daily prayers of thanksgiving to God. I invite you to explore our worship theme in your daily spiritual practice.

The science of positive psychology has demonstrated conclusively the importance of practicing gratitude for a healthy human life. But we people of faith already knew that. Walter Brueggemann proclaims that gratitude is “the ultimate practice of faith.” He describes thanksgiving as the very “impetus for life with” God in the Hebrew tradition. He writes, “Israel endlessly recited the *inventory of acts of divine fidelity* and probed for the right responses in gratitude.”

He explains that our gratitude to God “calls us away from the modern illusion of self-sufficiency” and reminds us that our lives depend upon God. This “is an odd way to live” he admits. Yet we see it in the stories of all those people who’ve found themselves in times of trouble and called to God in their distress and been delivered, like the people in this here Psalm. “No wonder the folks in the psalm have tales to tell and offerings to bring!” he writes. “By them we are drawn into the generosity of God, which evokes gratitude.”

In the summer of 2004, not long after their wedding, I came out to my Mom and my new step-dad Revis Stanford. I didn't know how the moment would go, I especially didn't know what my new step-dad might say. But Revis reached out and held my hand and said, “Scotty, why should that matter? I love you like my own son. This doesn't change anything.”

And so Revis Stanford became a hero in my story.

Revis died at the end of August. This All Saints Sunday, I remember him and celebrate his life. I give thanks to God for Revis Stanford and how I was blessed by him.

Who are the people you are remembering and celebrating this year? For whom are you giving thanks?

What I remember most about Edna Kruse was that she was always smiling. Her smile and her laughter were infectious. She was a lifelong Congregationalist, proud of that. Here at First Central she was a devoted Sunday school teacher, having blessed the children of this congregation. Jim Harmon shared with me that every time he visited Edna over the last decade when she was mostly homebound, she always wanted to be sure she was caught up on her pledge, as giving financially to the church was important to her.

Ron Butler and Ken Coats were only members here for a short while, as they ultimately moved on to Palm Springs, California to enjoy their retirement. Ron and Ken were a couple for more than fifty years, an amazing accomplishment for two gay men who met in the 1960's in Nebraska. At Ron's funeral his nieces and nephews mourned his loss, as their entire lives he had so good and generous with them. More than an uncle, he was another father figure to them. And I remember Ron's kindness when our son Sebastian was born—he sent a gift with a note celebrating that Michael and I were able to adopt, confessing that having their own children was something he and Ken would have enjoyed but never were able to even consider it.

One thing about Ellie Caron that stood out was the way she contributed money to multiple causes and organizations. But what I remember most about her was her devotion to her late husband Joe and to honoring his memory. One of the trees in our courtyard was given

by Ellie in memory of Joe, and she was always so concerned about that tree and whether it was being watered and otherwise properly taken care of.

Janet Bouma was a devoted wife and loving mother and grandmother. She was gracious and hospitable, sharing with everyone, including many in this church. One of our former members described Janet as “God’s hands and feet in the world” and added, “I’ll never forget her laugh.” Janet made people’s lives more rich and full and enjoyable.

Of all Pipi Peterson’s many gifts, this congregation will remember her the longest because she loved our kids. She demonstrated during almost thirty years of being an on-again, off-again staff member here. Pipi touched so very many lives. Her influence continues to bless others, because the kids she helped to teach have their own kids and they’ve become teachers and influencers. Her life soared beyond its physical limitations, reaching out across space and time.

This year we gather for All Saints, to remember and honor our dead, a week after eleven worshippers were killed at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We remember and honor them as well today, giving thanks to God for their lives.

Joyce Fienberg had retired from a career as a research specialist at the University of Pittsburgh where she specialized in researching the best classroom educational techniques. According to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, her students most remembered her for being “a warm host who welcomed them into her family’s home and kept sending holiday cards for years afterward.”

Dr. Richard Gottfried was a dentist who donated his time to dental free clinics, in particular one that served refugees and immigrants.

Rose Mallinger was the oldest victim, at 97 years of age. A devoted member of the Synagogue, her family described her as a woman of “sharp wit, humor and intelligence until the very last day.”

Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz was a beloved family physician. One of his colleagues said that Dr. Rabinowitz was “one of the finest people I’ve ever met in my life. He had a moral compass stronger than anyone I have ever known.”

Cecil and David Rosenthal were brothers with developmental disabilities who loved attending synagogue and went every week without fail, according to news reports. Cecil was one of the greeters at the synagogue. They were described as “larger than life. . . . two of the most kind, generous people. . . . entwined into the fabric of their community.”

According to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, “Daniel Stein helped out everywhere and made the tough stuff look effortless.” One of his friends said, “You call on him for a tough task, and he’ll do it without looking for any kind of pat on the back or plaque or anything.”

Melvin Wax, a retired accountant, was leading services last week. His rabbi described him as “perpetually happy.” His cousin said, ““If you look in the dictionary under the word unselfish, you’ll see the name Melvin Wax because he was one of the most unselfish people I’ve known in my entire life. If anyone on this earth walked humbly with their God, it was Mel Wax. He did not have a conceited bone in his body.” The 87-year-old Wax had recently organized a voter registration drive.

According to the Tribune-Review, “Bernice Simon baked delicious cranberry orange bread.” Bernice and Sylvan Simon, both victims, had been married in that synagogue in 1956.

Their children described them as “deeply in love with each other.” He was a retired accountant, she a retired nurse. That day they were going to host a family birthday party in their home.

The Post-Gazette wrote of Irving Young, He “did the tasks no one else wanted to — and he did them with a smile. When people came in to Tree of Life for services, he would greet them. He would guide them to a seat, and he would hand them a book if they needed one.” He was the congregant who always arrived early and always stayed late.

We give thanks for these lives, their love, and their influence. And we remember them. In the words of a Jewish prayer of remembrance,

At the rising sun and at its going down; We remember them.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter; We remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring; We remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer; We remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of the autumn; We remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends; We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as We remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength; We remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart; We remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make; We remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share; We remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs; We remember them.

For as long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as, We remember them.