

“Living Hallelujah!”

A sermon preached by Margaret Wallin at
First Congregational Church U
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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

As I read and studied this scripture, mulling it over in my mind and paying attention to what stood out for me, I was struck again and again by the final lines of the reading:

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

It seems to me that these lines enjoin us to participate in holy, joyful, grateful sacrifice of praise, thanksgiving, and works of compassion towards others in the faith community and to reach outside the faith community to those who need God so very much, to in some respect “put feet on our prayers”, to contribute our personal efforts and resources towards accomplishing God’s purposes. It is not so much what specific acts we perform that is most important. It is the attitude with which we do all that we do. We are to have an **attitude** of gratitude, and a willingness to serve the one who is the source of all that we have, even our very lives.

My very first class in seminary was taught by a Dominican nun, who bless her heart, had some interesting twists on theology. When a snowstorm kicked up on the last day of the weekend class, she assured us that God would give us safe passage, “because God owes it to you!” It struck me as strange. I don’t feel that God owes me anything. Grace cannot be earned or lost, only accepted or rejected. I do think we too often forget that we owe God -- everything.

When the testers ask Jesus about paying taxes, his response is: Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s. For the believer, all is God’s. There is a wonderful hymn that says “We give thee but thine own, what e’re the gift may be, all that we have is thine alone a trust o Lord from thee.” We owe it all to God, but we forget . . .

There are certain people to whom I owe so very much. People who have played important roles in my life, helping me along at critical junctures, accepting me with all my foibles, loving me even when I felt unlovable, helping me in a many different of ways, suitable for the individuals involved. Some of these people I consider my personal cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before me, who have demonstrated their faith in unique and moving ways, those whose examples I find encouraging when the going gets rough. Many of that cloud of witnesses are people who are no longer living on this plane.

But there are, of course, others, for whom I am very grateful – those who have shown up just at the right time, bringing just the right thing that was needed in that moment, those who have offered me mercy and forgiveness freely, without need or requirement for me to earn it in some way or another, and with no demand that I grovel for it. There are those who have offered help in ways both tangible and costly of their own time and energy – and there are **none** who have done more in this regard than my friend Kathy. She voluntarily prays for me every Saturday that I prepare a sermon, when I served in Breckenridge church, she would often come from Lansing to help serve our fundraising chicken dinners. She has been my cohort in pottery – my very good friend and confidante. She has given me SO VERY MUCH. My life has been greatly enriched by her presence in it, her thoughtfulness, her faith and her devotion to God. She has been there for medical procedures, stayed with me after surgeries, and offered all kinds of assistance. She did more than anyone else – and more than anyone could be expected to do – to help me clear out my Lansing house, and then the parsonage for my final move up north – sorting things for charity, cataloging the donation, and even delivering some of the stuff to Goodwill.

She has listened endlessly to my concerns of daily life. Sometimes offering sympathy, sometimes a call to repent, always she offers herself, her friendship, her fidelity. When I think about all that she has brought to my life, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. My feeling -- my desire is to give back to her all I can, with interest if possible.

So when she called one day a few years back needing my assistance, there was no question that I would respond. I joyfully, gratefully drove to Lansing to help her out – just grateful for the opportunity to give something back to her, after all she has done for me. Joyful to be of service, not of course for the cause of the need, for she was in excruciating pain from a severe back issue that pinched a nerve, making it impossible for her to go and do things for herself.

But here is the point of this – As strong as my feeling and desire is to give back to this precious friend of mine was and is – how much more do I owe to God? What would it be like if my response to God was as heartfelt and immediate, without doubts or waffling, determined to do all that might be possible to do to give glory to God through my life – by praising God openly, lifting hallelujahs for all the grace I have received. Hallelujahs lived out by caring for my brothers and sisters, and for reaching out to those who are vulnerable little ones. I want to make my response to God to be at least as quick and sure as my response to Kathy. For as much as I owe Kathy and trust me it is a lot, I owe God far more. So much that there is no way to ever repay enough to say “I am done now – God and I are even.”

The way I see it, it is God who knit me together in my mother's womb. It is God who breathed life into my newborn body. It is God who has watched over me, guided me, kept his promise to be with me, even in the darkest of times – the times when I am least lovable, when I am miserable and otherwise feeling lost, helpless, hopeless, and afraid. It is God who called me to a life of service in this faith community. It is God who sent his son Jesus. Jesus, who **is** God, comes to earth, sacrificing the perks of divinity in order that humankind might know the God of love, the God of mercy, the God of justice, the God of peace, all of whom together form the One true God.

Consider for a moment what Jesus sacrificed for that goal! He had no royal home with servants to wait on him. He did not even have a “normal” home with wife and children or the normal accoutrements of a successful man of his time. A successful man – one whom it would be assumed God had blessed would have a wife and many healthy well behaved children, who also would have children, and would have enough wealth to feed them all and give generously to the Temple. He would be a patriarch of a good family—like Abraham. Jesus did not get that life. No, he doffed his divinity, stripped it off like clothing at the end of a day along with all the rights that might be imagined to go with that divinity. He left all of that behind to take on a life of teaching, preaching, healing – immersed in the messiness of human life – so that we might know a better way to live, that we might understand what the Kingdom of God is all about. He sacrificed his will to be able to complete the mission upon which God sent him.

And of course, he sacrificed his life's breath, because killing him was the world's response to his message that was so way **RADICAL** – he preached and taught an upside down world called the K of G. He taught that might does **NOT** make right, that kings are to **CARE** for people. He challenged the religious elite, faulting them for making life so difficult for the people, without regard really to what **God** required. He taught that those close to God are responsible to reach out to bring others into the divine embrace, to encourage repentance and restoration of relationship, **without** causing unnecessary hardship. He taught that we are to love one another.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we have the faith community that is indispensable for living a Christian life. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we know about the One true God. Because of his sacrifice, we have available the basics of what God wants for us and what God promises to us. That promise is to be with us, loving us, working for good in our lives, working to bring about the best life for each of God's children, and in the end receiving us into the heavenly kingdom.

And our part? Our part is to sacrifice our pettiness, our small mindedness, our inward focus – we are to sacrifice our narcissistic mindset in order to be able to offer a sacrifice of

praise – to lift our hallelujahs to God for all God has done and continues to do to bring life abundant to us. The writer of Hebrews tells us that a sacrifice of praise is pleasing to God.

Why do we call it a sacrifice, this praising? Praising God is a sacrifice of our human pride. Pride that can arise from our desire to believe that it is all our own doing when things go well – and someone else’s fault when things fall apart.

Now, we have had some hard times in the last few years. Of course, there has been the upset of the pandemic, the effects of that pandemic on the economy, then, of course the tornado that ripped through town. There have been personal losses, loved ones who have passed away, health concerns for ourselves and our loved ones, financial concerns, dissension between political factions, violence and threats of violence . . . and the list could go on and on. One might legitimately question how we are to follow the admonition to raise hallelujahs and offer a sacrifice of praise to God through all that.

When the hard times come, when disaster strikes, one of my favorite theologians, Mr. Rogers, says – look for the helpers. Look for those who reach out, volunteering to help put out the trash from the tornado, or to furnish money or skills or material to assist in the rebuild. Look at all the care and love poured out upon those who have suffered loss, or who are in peril for their health. When we contributed sandwiches for the effort, we saw volunteers who came up from the Saginaw area to help. They said they had been affected by the floods when the dams broke, had received help, and a) knew the need, and b) wanted to give back. For those efforts and so many more, we can raise hallelujahs and offer a proper sacrifice of praise to God. For who is it that calls these to action, who has loved so that we might love, who is it? God through Christ Jesus teaches us to lift our thanks and praise, and to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need.

Having been given all. Having received so very much at the sacrifice from the One who owed us nothing, but to whom we owe everything, how can our response be anything less than a joyful, grateful sacrifice of praise to God, living our hallelujah through good times and hard times? See what we have now – we are a people so blessed, even in the messiness of life. So, let us rejoice, lift our hallelujahs, and live those hallelujahs every day.

In the many names of God, AMEN.