

God's Household

Dec. 31, 2006

Psalm 148

The Psalms hold a special place in the hearts of many. I think this is because they brim with imagination and emotion. The Psalms speak to us on the deepest of levels. Most biblical scholars believe the Psalms were meant to be sung. They functioned as ancient Israel's hymn book. And some scholars believe that many of the psalms were sung by specific clans or families. These families would lift up their voices on behalf of the community to express joy, sadness, fear, anger, gratitude, and devotion. Given the idea that families sang the psalms, I find Psalm 148 particularly challenging, because it calls on us to expand our definition of "family." The invitation to join in *this* hymn of praise is extended to *all* human beings. The psalmist says, "Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of God..." The psalmist doesn't stop there. All of creation is called to lift up their voices in praise. "You heavens; you angels and hosts; you sun, moon, and shining stars; you highest heavens and waters above the heavens; sea monsters and all deeps; fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind; you mountains and hills; you fruit trees and all cedars; wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds..." all these beings are meant to join in a hymn of praise to the Heavenly Parent.

Now many people tend to have an anthropomorphic view of God, and this leads to the idea that human beings are the only beings capable of praising the Creator. But, Psalm 148 paints a much larger and more vibrant picture, one in which all of God's creatures are valued and made to glorify their Maker.

Creation worships alongside humanity. Now you may be wondering how other beings praise God. Certainly they don't worship in the same way we human beings do. Other creatures are different, but they do praise God, and Psalm 19 may provide clues as to how this is accomplished. In verses 1-4 the psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are their words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Creation does not "speak" the way we humans do. Instead, creation's voice of praise is heard through the act of *Being*. Turtles praise God by *being* turtles, by moving slowly, and feeding on vegetation, and taking refuge in their shells. The sun praises God by *being* the sun, by providing heat and light, and by following its course. Creation praises God by simply *being* what it is created to be. We tend to believe that reason is a necessary component to having a relationship with God. But it is also necessary in our relationship with the Creator to *be* all that God creates us to be. Human beings have a thing or two to learn from other creatures.

Psalm 148 urges us to be more inclusive. A hymn of praise that only includes God's human family members, and excludes the rest of God's household - trees, animals, or *any* created being is a hymn that rings flat. When *one* voice is missing, the family song of praise is diminished. There's an illustration that may help to make this point. Think about "family" in the more conventional sense of the word. Most of us just spent time with our families over Christmas. And many of us will be with family again this evening as we ring in the New Year. Have you had a family gathering and one of your loved ones was absent for some reason? Maybe a beloved grandparent was too frail to

make a wedding celebration. Maybe a sibling missed a family reunion because their work demanded it. Perhaps a parent missed your last birthday because they passed on. It just isn't the same when a family member is missing from an important gathering. Their presence, their voice makes the celebration more lively, and even the negative voices that sometimes ring out of tune are missed. For example, I had a great-aunt who was a bit on the cranky side. When we gathered for holiday meals this great-aunt would bowl over anyone who dared to take home the leftover dinner rolls that another aunt made from scratch. And we knew better than to eat too many of the rolls during dinner. My great-aunt would give you a raised eyebrow if you took one too many of those precious rolls. And I miss my cranky but loveable great-aunt, and the way she hoarded those dinner rolls. Now that she's passed on, holiday dinners just aren't the same. Maybe you can relate.

Those of you who have beloved pets understand that they're family members in their own special way. Our family pet growing up was a yappy, little schnauzer. She was a little like my cranky great-aunt. Well, my parents had a ski boat when we were younger, and we would sometimes vacation at different lake resorts. And, our dog went with us on lake vacations; she even went on the ski boat. She had her own life vest; it was called "poochy pal." And it was hilarious to see our yappy schnauzer in a life vest. My dad would throw her overboard when we anchored the boat to swim. And our little dog would splash and play alongside us, barking the *entire* time. And, vacations that didn't include our dog just weren't as much fun. Maybe you have fond memories of animal family members too.

Gatherings are not the same when a loved one is missing. And, when we begin to see the world through the eyes of faith, we realize that our families are

much larger than we originally thought. Our family circle widens to include our friends, our enemies, strangers, trees, birds, insects; *everyone* and *everything* is related to us! And, all these beings are called to praise the Heavenly Parent alongside us.

There's a quote I love that comes from the 15th Century Reformer Martin Luther. As many of you know, Luther wasn't one to mince words. He wrote: "Do you think God is sleeping on a pillow in heaven? God is wholly present in all creation, in every corner, behind and before you." Luther also said, "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." Luther understood that God's household includes more than human beings. And it is unjust when we act in ways that prevent us from hearing the Gospel, the good news, in its entirety. Not only that, but it's a travesty to prevent other created beings from fully sharing in the good news. Luther's words were spoken hundreds of years ago, yet they are pertinent in this day and age, in a time when the current rate of animal and plant extinctions is 100 to 1000 times higher than it should be under normal conditions. How tragic it is that younger generations may see the end of polar bears, snow leopards, grey wolves, marine turtles, monarch butterflies, large-fruited sand verbenas, and many, many more. Habitat loss, pollution, and climate changes are the main threats to God's creation. God's creatures cannot praise their Creator if we extinguish them from the earth. Psalm 148 and other biblical passages like it challenge us to live in ways that allow creation to fully praise the Heavenly Parent. How different might our world be if we cherished and celebrated our connection to everyone and everything?

Psalm 148 reveals the reality that our family spans the globe. And, God's household is diverse, intricate, and beautiful. To care for God's creation is to

praise our amazing and loving Creator. And, each day we have an opportunity to honor the fact that all people and all creatures, even those we find difficult, are invited to lift up their voices in praise to the Source of All Life.

I want to leave you with a poem from the Russian novelist Fedor Dostoevski. It is called, "Love of Creation."

"Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it.
Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals,
love the plants, love everything.
If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery
in things.
Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better
everyday.
And you will come at last to love the whole world with an
all-embracing love."

I pray we come to love the whole world with an all-embracing love, in Christ's name. Amen.