

## Pleasant Boundaries

As we come to the end of this Thanksgiving weekend I thought it might be appropriate to reflect on Psalm 16. It is a psalm that speaks of many things we should be thankful for. The psalmist says, “Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.’ I say of the holy people who are in the land, ‘They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.’ Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

What strikes me most in this psalm are the different ways David expresses how God is the source of his blessings. “In you I take refuge”, “you have made my lot secure”, “praise the Lord who counsels me”, “you will not abandon me”, “you

fill me with joy in your presence.” I wonder when David wrote this psalm. Did he write it as a shepherd boy or perhaps as a young prince in Israel. Did he write it while he was being hunted as a rebel fugitive by an insanely jealous King Saul, or perhaps as a victorious warrior reflecting back over one of his many military conquests. Or was this perhaps penned toward the end of David’s life as a broken monarch or a wise old King? We don’t really know for sure, psalms don’t come with copy-right dates inserted at the bottom of the page. But maybe a more important question would be, “Does it really matter when David wrote this?” Is it not true this psalm would be no less true no matter what David’s situation might have been? Isn’t it true that this psalm speaks to any situation we find ourselves in? At the same time, it seems to me this is the kind of psalm one writes toward the end of life, after one has experience all the good and bad life brings to you, that is perhaps the best and only time we can really appreciate all the ways God has proven himself faithful.

In this last year we have seen marriages begin and end, new lives born into this world, other lives leave this world, some far sooner than we expected. We have celebrated the joyous occasions and wept over the heartbreaking ones. Yesterday brought unexpected blessings and unimaginable trouble; tomorrow will be the same. Today for you may be one of the best days of your lives and the same day for others one of the worst. And tomorrow everything will change. Well, not

everything. One thing never changes and that is what this Psalm is about. In it David praises a God in whom he can take refuge, a God who he can trust to make his boundaries pleasant.

For David it all begins with an attitude toward God. “You are my Lord, apart from you I have no good thing.” God is the source of all good things in our lives. As James would tell us hundreds of years later, “Every good gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights who does not change like the shifting shadows” (Jms 1:17).

Blessing begins with belief, particularly what we believe about God. People believe all kinds of things about God today. Some do not believe God exists at all. There are others who believe he exists but wish he didn't, for the god they believe in is a grim God, eager to punish. When bad things happen their first response almost always is, “Why did God do this to me? As if every bad event in our life is an expression of God's personal judgment against us. Still others believe in is a distant deity. They do not believe in a God who brings trouble into our lives. Their God is too far away to even be aware of the troubles of our lives. He is blissfully removed from our pain and suffering. And then there are those who believe the father God is more like a Godfather who runs a kind of divine protection racket like the old mob bosses. Their god is capricious and fickle; he doesn't much care about us really as long as we pay up. He is not a god we

lovingly please, he is a god we fearfully appease. As long as we pay his price, offer the right sacrifice, he promises he will leave us alone.

Those are some of the gods people believe in; they are not gods who bring blessing and they are certainly not David's God. Yahweh the Lord is not capricious and fickle; he is steadfast and faithful. Yahweh is not distant and unaware of us; he is intimately near and infinitely interested in us. Yahweh is not grim and eager to punish us; he is gracious and eager to delight us. That's what another Psalm says about him. "He satisfies the desires of every living thing" (Psalm 145).

I love the story told by one of my favorite Christian singers, Barry McGuire. He tells of a time when he was a young man, before he met the Lord, when he worked on fishing boats just off the coast of San Pedro Bay, California. One of the things he loved about his job was leaning over the ship's rail and occasionally getting to see a dolphin swim by. He tells about one day when a dolphin swam right up to the boat and he could almost reach down and touch him. Then he got an idea. He ran to the galley and got a towel and tied a knot on the end. Then he came back and leaned over the rail and whacked the back of the dolphin. Rather than chase the dolphin away, the dolphin seemed to like it and would swim back over and over and let Barry whack him again. Sometimes the dolphin would launch itself into the air right next to Barry and Barry would whack him in the air.

Then, after one particularly hard whack, the dolphin swam away and Barry was a little sad, thinking he may have hit him too hard and chased him away. But then, as he was sitting there thinking how much he loved dolphins, all of the sudden he looked up and here came a whole school of dolphins, all of them swimming by and jumping up to be whacked by Barry. It was as if that first dolphin went back and told all his friends “Hey you gotta come and see this crazy human I found.” For the next hour or so Barry he says he was in sheer ecstasy whacking dolphins. Then after awhile they all began to swim away except for one who hung around for one last whack. Barry said he wasn’t sure but he thought it was the first one who stayed for a while. Then that one left and as he watched it swim away Barry says he heard a voice from deep inside of him say, “Barry, I made those dolphins, just for your pleasure.” Barry said at the time he didn’t know whose voice it was, but later he learned it was the voice of his Lord, the creator of dolphins and everything else, the God who satisfies the desire of every living thing, dolphins and humans.

This psalm is not just about the attitude we should have about God; it also instructs us in the attitude we should have toward people, especially the people of God around us. *“As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.”* David has a love for the people God has put into his life, “the saints in the land.” These are the people who introduced David to the

Lord, the people who raised him spiritually and continue to shape his faith. These are people like his father Jesse, his brothers, the prophet who anointed him, Samuel, the prophet who rebuked him, Nathan, his closest friend Jonathan, his trusted advisor, Joab and in general the children of Israel who made up the kingdom. These were not perfect people by any stretch; the Bible is filled with the stories of their sins, their failures, their jealousies, their angers and misbehavior. And yet, as he reflects on the blessings of the Lord, David specifically delights in the people of God that God has placed around him.

We are called to love one another, to cherish one another, to thank God for putting us together. We don't give thanks for each other's perfection but for the perfection of the one who has put us together. Yes we will have moments when we don't fully appreciate the blessing of the fellowship of the saints; but we will have better moments when we not only appreciate, but we cherish the people who introduced us to the Lord, the people who raised us to follow Jesus, the people who are always there when we trouble and tragedy visit us.

Sometimes we let controversy trump community. I remember the Holy Spirit Wars, or as we sometimes referred to it, *Charismania*. People argued and divided over the Holy Spirit, what he could and couldn't do. I remember one of our saints, Armand Weathers, saying he wasn't sure what all the Holy Spirit did or didn't enable us to do, but he was pretty sure arguing and dividing over the Spirit

was not a work of the Spirit. Later came the “worship wars.” Everyone was arguing about how to best worship God, which songs should we sing, should people clap or not clap in worship, should we have solos or choruses or praise teams in worship. We argued over how to be worshipful! I am thankful our elders at that time understood that true worship, whatever else it is, always is the celebration of God’s grace toward us and therefore should be demonstrated in a desire to show grace toward each other. I remember my father saying worship shouldn’t be about preferring this song or that style; rather, worship should be about preferring one another. I sometimes tell people at Quaker everyone’s a little upset because no one always get his way, but no one’s really upset because someone always gets his way. To paraphrase David *“As for the saints at Quaker, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.”*

But being delighted does not mean there will not be difficult times. David goes on to describe another attitude that may not at first seem all that loving or gracious. “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.” It is not clear whether David is talking about the pagans around Israel or the Israelites who began to live like pagans. In either case, being gracious and loving to others, whether they are our brothers, our neighbors or even our enemies, does not mean ignoring behavior that is wrong and harmful to people. David would not have

anything to do with any lifestyle that worships anything that is abhorrent to God. David realized the destructive influences that occur when people choose not to love God, who choose to live their lives devoted to what displeases God. Here David's words sound very much like the beginning of the first Psalm. *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. They are like chaff which the wind blows away, they will not stand in the judgment.*

We are to love God and all people, no exceptions. But we are loving no one (God or people) when we participate in, or encourage others in behavior that dishonors God. If someone tells a filthy joke, love does not laugh at it. If someone makes a racist remark, love does not suggest approval by silence. If someone chooses to be immoral, love is not timid or reluctant to confront. If someone promotes hate and evil, love may very well rebuke and correct. Out of fear of being thought judgmental or self-righteous, we sometimes decide to be polite and avoid conflict. But true love comes from God and he is not too polite to call people away from the devastation of sin. Love says the loving thing and sometimes the most loving words are hard words. As the Proverbs say, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

Finally this Psalm describes an attitude toward life in general. David recognized the unique blessings that came from the distinct places where God had

put him. *Lord, you have assigned my portion and my cup...the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.* Like David, all of us have been also assigned by God to distinct places with their unique blessings. We all have been given our portion, our cup; we all live within boundary lines, those specific relationships in our life. We all have our inheritances, those specific legacies in whose shadows we dwell.

Now, we could all find fault with where God has put us. Sometimes our situations are difficult; sometimes our relationships do not encourage; sometimes the legacies handed down to us are less than honorable. But don't be under the illusion that David is somehow naïve to such things; he understood how hard life could be. He didn't ask to be hunted by an insanely jealous King. There is little pleasure in having one's own son leading a rebellion against you. David did not write Psalm 16 as a kind of escapist literature. He isn't attempting to ignore the harsh realities of life and in their place paint a *Polly-Annish* picture of life. I like very much what one writer said about this Psalm. Its' "*not escapist in the sense of becoming blind to the facts; it is rather the facing of other facts...facts of permanency.* David's awareness of the overwhelming sunlight of God's blessing in his life, cannot be easily eclipsed by the momentary darkneses of life.

David would agree wholeheartedly with Paul who would write years later, "*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet*

*inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4: 16 -18). Or the words of John, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4).*

As he closes David enumerates those permanent blessings that life’s troubles cannot eclipse. *I will praise the Lord who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me”* counsel that David describes in another psalm as a treasure more precious than silver or gold. David says of God *you will not abandon him to the grave nor will you let your holy one see decay*, revealing some level of an awareness of a life to come after death. Then, most precious of all, *you fill me with joy in your presence*, the unspeakable joy to be near one’s creator.

And so, as we come to the end of this Thanksgiving weekend, it is a good thing for us not just to remember these words, but to make these words of David our own response to the goodness of God in our lives. David’s life was not without its troubles; neither are ours. But surely we would declare this morning with David that the blessings which God has poured into our lives far outweigh the troubles, surely this morning we too with the apostle Paul want to fix our eyes not on our momentary troubles that are today present, but the eternal glory that is

tomorrow promised. Surely we can with David declare, *“The boundary lines for us too have fallen in pleasant places and we have a delightful inheritance.”*