

14 Pentecost Yr C, 25/08/2013
Ps 103:1-8
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson
Interim Pastor of Unity Lutheran Church,
Medicine Hat, Alberta

“Remembering God’s benefits”

As you know, much has been written about Martin Luther. On one occasion, Luther’s face showed a great deal of sadness while he sat at the breakfast table with his wife. “What time is the funeral?” Katie asked him.

“What funeral? Who died?” Luther wanted to know.

She replied, “From the look on your face, I thought God had.”

Luther, on this occasion, had forgotten what he himself so often emphasised in his preaching and teaching—namely, that to know and trust in God means to know, trust in, and recall God's benefits. In today's psalm; which may originally have been one of Israel's hymns of praise and thanks to God; which they may have sung during their festivals in the temple; the psalmist instructs us to remember—“do not forget all God's benefits.”

As I read and studied this psalm, it occurred to me how well it compliments our Lutheran theology. Our theology places a strong emphasis on God's action; on what God has done for us. This psalm highlights exactly that—God's action, what God has done, is doing, and shall do in the future. The psalmist provides us with a list of verbs describing God and God's activity. Listen to them again: God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's, works vindication and justice, made known his ways to Moses, and his acts to Israel, is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Wow! That's quite a list, isn't it?!

One of the most popular misconceptions that I as a pastor have heard from far too many laypeople over the years is that the Old Testament God is a God of fire, brimstone and judgement—a God of wrath who takes great delight in punishing people every chance he gets. Quite frankly, that view of God is a

bunch of bunk, and certainly is not the God that I believe in, worship and serve! Yes, there are passages in the Hebrew Bible that describe God in some of these ways. However those passages need to be balanced by passages like today's psalm where we discover a loving God. That is why we as Lutherans, when we read the Bible employ one method of interpretation that is true to the whole of the Bible—namely, that scripture interprets scripture. If we read and dwell on only the passages that describe God as a foreboding judge, then that is the kind of God we will end up believing in. However if we balance the more difficult passages with other passages like today's psalm, then we will end up with a much healthier picture of who God is and what kind of God we believe in.

So, back to our psalm then and to a couple of verses that I'd like to focus on today, verses 6 and 8. In verse 6 we're told: "The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed."

According to one scholar, Professor Henry Langknecht: Vindication has many layers of connotation; it can be a simple synonym for justice, deliverance, or vengeance. But at a deeper level vindication occurs when a point of view, belief, or action that has been condemned, dismissed, or undervalued is shown finally to be true—sometimes by the endorsement of some authority; sometimes by a surprising unfolding of events.

And while being vindicated (especially after persecution for holding an unpopular minority view) often leads to smugness, it is also possible to imagine vindication leading to relief, joy, and reunion....¹

As I thought about this insight, I thought this is exactly what we have happening in today's gospel when Jesus heals the bent over woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath. She was most likely written off by most folks in her community as a sinner who was being punished for her sin by this physical disability of being a hunchback. Can you imagine the teasing, the ridicule, the name-calling, and judgemental labels that folks in her community put on this bent over woman? However, Jesus knew much better. He knew that pathology at its roots is all-too-often a case of mistaken identity.² She

had been sick in part by the pathology of her community insofar as she believed the negative, judgemental labels they named her with. Suddenly, without warning, along comes Jesus who heals her of such pathology; not only by his physical healing touch, but also by naming her differently—now he calls her “a daughter of Abraham,” giving back her true identity. As theologian Paul Tillich reminds us: Jesus is the “Saviour” which means the “healer.” He is able to make whole and sane what is broken and insane in body and mind.³

I can imagine how much joy and freedom that bent over woman felt; how grateful she was to Jesus for such healing; how hopeful she became of a new, redeemed future with new opportunities for her life to flourish.

That, I think, is also the essence of what we are told by the psalmist concerning God in verse 8: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” I think that verse captures the best of what both Jews and Christians believe about who God is and what he is doing. The Hebrew root word for merciful is related to a mother’s womb, and has the meaning of God’s love being like a mother to her child, a love that is unconditional. The word gracious carries the meaning of God’s favour towards us even though we don’t deserve it and cannot do anything to earn it—coming to us as a priceless gift. Slow to anger harkens back to the time when God provided for the Israelites’ needs even though they complained constantly while wandering in the wilderness. Abounding in steadfast love, from the Hebrew, has the meaning of kindness, loyalty, and covenant faithfulness. God keeps God’s promises over the long haul; God refuses to give up on us.

So, today we are witnesses to God's mercy and grace, God's abundant, steadfast love as we celebrate Bentley's baptism. In addition to his parents giving him his name, and his identity being linked to the family he was born into; God is active and present today in the sacrament of baptism to name and claim Bentley as a child of God, a son of God, a member of God's family, and a member of Christ's body, the church. His identity as a baptized child of God is one he and we can celebrate and be proud of and grateful for. As Bentley lives his life, God will always be there with him and for him, offering Bentley his

mercy, grace and steadfast love. God's loyalty; God's trustworthiness; God's dependability can be counted on because of who he is and what he has done, is doing, and shall do through Jesus to love and save us. For that we give our thanks and praise to God! Amen.

1 Henry Langknecht's commentary on Ps 103 at:
<www.workingpreacher.org>.

2 Unfortunately I've lost the source of this quote—"pathology at its roots is all-too-often a case of mistaken identity."

3 Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 43.