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“What are Human Beings, That You are Mindful of Them”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 7, 2020

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Scriptures: Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20

Psalm 8

1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals[a] that you care for them? 5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,[b] and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Footnotes

- a. Psalm 8:4 Hebrew ben adam, lit. son of man
- b. Psalm 8:5 Or than the divine beings or angels: Hebrew elohim

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13

11 Finally, brothers and sisters, [a] farewell. [b] Put things in order, listen to my appeal,[c] agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of[d] the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Footnotes

- a. 2 Corinthians 13:11 Greek brothers
- b. 2 Corinthians 13:11 Or rejoice
- c. 2 Corinthians 13:11 Or encourage one another
- d. 2 Corinthians 13:13 Or and the sharing in

Matthew 18: 16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”[a]

Footnotes a. Matthew 28:20 Other ancient authorities add Amen

Sermon

The Psalmist looked up at the heavens, and wondered,
*“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?”*

- Share what you think about when you look upon the heavens.
- Share what you wonder about God’s gaze upon creation, for humanity, for you.
- Share what you imagine to be God’s mindfulness of humanity in these days, and our mindfulness for one another.

[For those taking notes or who care about such things, that, my friends, is today’s outline.]

This week a roofer named Cory climbed down a ladder
and showed photos he’d just taken atop my family home,
photos of a hole in our roof and round dings on exposed flashing.
Clearly one shingle, swept away by forces of nature, caused a ripple effect of damage.
And then, somehow, in one sentence,
Cory the Roofer got legal, meteorological, and theological.

“This here hole and these dings are caused by storm and hail damage,” he said,
“what is known to your insurance company as an Act of God.”

Acts of God

Actus Dei – Latin for literally a “driving” or the “moving forward of God.”

This is the legal term used by attorneys and insurance companies
to describe an event or phenomena beyond human control,
a natural phenomenon or catastrophe
such as an earthquake, hurricane, volcanic eruption, or tornado,
something natural for which there is no legal redress.

They say that a footnote in Genesis indicates that, after the Flood,
a State Farm Insurance claim reported
Noah’s neighbors were dismayed to discover
their homes were not insured against Acts of God.

The Good News is that the Holy Bible presents the creation of the universe
and the creation of all that walk and swim and fly and crawl on Earth
as Acts of God:
the moving forward of God is creative, constructive, reshaping,
making something good out of what seems like chaos.

The Bible testifies that out of chaos God creates something,

for God makes something out of something.
What God creates is *a natural blessing*.

Acts of God

Let's back up to the beginning.

The Holy Scriptures open with a magnificent hymn of creation.

The entire story of creation unfolds from a towering clause, "*In the beginning...*"

"In the beginning" comes from a single word

in both Hebrew (Beresit) and Greek (Genesis),

which in turn becomes the title of the first book in the Holy Bible.

"Beresit and Genesis mean not the beginning of something

but simply The Beginning. Everything begins with God." Claus Westerman

The poetic language of Genesis imagines God gazing in wonder

at what has been created

and what is still forming, still birthing, still growing, still evolving.

God looks upon creation and calls it good.

Good.

Wonderful.

Pure.

Again, some Latin: **actus purus**, meaning "pure act,"

Actus Purus Dei which refers to the purity of any act of God

What God has created is pure, beautiful, wonderful.

What God has made, let no one put down.

What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Acts of God

God is one who acts.

God, however, apparently chooses not to act alone.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

God invites, involves, integrates

that which is created to be a part of creation,

to be a part of the action, the driving force, the forward movement.

God creates in such a way that all of God's creatures are engaged,

empowered, commissioned to act, to think, to dream, to be.

Think of it this way, as a form of modern math:

Unconditional Love Plus Power = Actus Dei, Acts of God

The One Who Created and Creates combines

our availability and capacity for loving, accepting, understanding

with the power to be engaged in the here and now.

What are humans, mortals, that God is mindful of us,

trusting us to be and do the right thing

Acts of God

A few minutes ago we read Psalm 8 responsively,
speaking and listening to a hymn of awe.
William Shakespeare, desiring to admire God's creative power,
quotes Psalm 8 in *Hamlet* -- "*What a piece of work is man.*"
Shakespeare grasped that Psalm 8 is an ode
to the creative power and blessings of our Creator,
who invites us to be a part of this loving action, *actus purus*:
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
...When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet...

"Under their feet"

Sounds oppressive.
Regression in the midst of a psalm of awe.
You and I may know some folks
who think it's their right to put others under their feet, to dominate,
to use the resources at their disposal to subjugate and rule,
as if putting someone else down lifts you up.
We, O Mortals, should know better.
God created us, raised us, redeemed us to be better than that.
Thank goodness domination of those made in God's image, *imago dei*,
is not what our Psalmist has in mind.

"under their feet"
when read with the eyes of faith, in the daylight of wonder,
means "under their care" or "under their custody"

We mortals are to be custodians, caretakers, loving stewards of one another.
We're the Acts of God the Holy Spirit has been waiting for, the Body of Jesus Christ.
What are mortals, then, that God cares for them, for us?
We are the custodians of creation.
We are the stewards of the planet.
We are the caretakers for one another.
Out of something comes something.
Something good, wonderful, pure, *Actus Purus*.

*That is who we are;
this is what we do;
thus shall be our defining glory.*

Acts of God

We have seen and are seeing what happens whenever we don't take care of each other.
One lost shingle on a rooftop,
swept away by forces of nature,
causes a ripple effect of damage.

Now the whole roof has to be undone, stripped to the core,
the rotten wood underneath replaced,
before a new, clean layer can be set upon the core, which is still good.

Mean acts, insensitive words,
the posting of hurtful, harmful, and hate-filled content has an effect, as well.
Some may think prejudicial jokes are funny.
Do you see the ones picked on laughing?

Here is some arithmetic that for some may seem elementary,
and for others may be hard to grasp, to understand at first hearing,
yet let it set a while, see what you think.

Prejudice Plus Power = Racism
Simplest, purest definition of a complex and cruel situation.
Prejudice Plus Power = Racism

People [and here if you see one coming toward you, I'm pointing four fingers at myself]
with access and means to power and privilege
coupled with pre-judging based on race
are practicing racism.

The only ones who can end racism are those with the power.
That is one reasons for the marching and kneeling and shouting.
To draw attention to erase racism.
The first step is to name it and claim it,
don't deny it, decry it,
get educated to eradicate it
from my life, and – if this is the case -- from yours as well.

Repair that roof with the lost shingles and holes and dings.
Strip off all the brokenness until you get down to the core, which is good, pure.
Then, and only then, rebuild,
one new shingle at a time, one tenet at a time,
toward a new attitude and recreated soul.

I know I am not alone in this effort to re-learn how to relate,

and that there are those pulling for me to be made like new.
Let's walk there, let's rebuild and repair, together.

Acts of God

What happens when we do care,
when we are custodians of each other?
Each act of purity, of kindness, of building up one another
has an even greater effect.

At a recent rally for addressing police brutality and ending racism,
we – a crowd of hundreds of Decatur citizens –
took a knee in the hot Georgia sun for almost nine minutes,
Actus Purus, a silent prayer the same amount of time
a police officer knelt on the neck
of George Floyd, who said, "I can't breathe," until he died.

As I knelt in prayer, I felt my sweat as it dripped down my face and rolled down by back.
Feelings poured out of me, as well.

I felt my privilege that as a white man
I do not live in fear as many of my neighbors do,
especially my brown and black neighbors.

I felt my shame for my own racism,
for every time my power and prejudice
combined to subjugate or dominate or discriminate.

I felt a tap on my back foot.
A young man kneeling behind me offered a bottle of Gatorade.
"Bless you," I said as I accepted his act of kindness.

It felt like Communion.

A New Covenant, a Covenant of Love, of Love Plus Power = Acts of God.

Acts of God personify kindness and mercy, causing ripples of hope.
People from all walks of life are starting to work together,
finally, finally, finally,
marching, listening, praying side by side,
speaking out for mercy together,
advocating
for the poor,
for city budgets that reflect human decency,
for an end to police brutality and senseless violence,
for the cessation of racism and hate,
for a beginning of communal accountability.

May God's people, acting with peace for justice,
send out ripples of hope, ripples that become waves,
something out of something, *actus purus dei*

You see, our Acts of God, like God's acts of love, have the power to save.

"THE ONION"

From *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

*"Once upon a time there was a woman, wicked as wicked could be, and she died.
And not one good deed was left behind her.*

The devils took her and threw her into the lake of fire.

Her guardian angel stood thinking:

What good deed of hers can I remember to tell God?

Then he remembered and said to God:

Once she pulled up an onion and gave it to a beggar woman.

God answered:

*Take now that same onion, hold it out to her in the lake,
let her take hold of it and pull,*

and if you pull her out of the lake, she can come into paradise.

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her:

Here, he said, take hold of it and I'll pull.

*And he began pulling carefully, and had almost pulled her all of the way out,
when other sinners in the lake saw her being pulled out*

and all began holding on to her so as to be pulled out with her.

But the woman was wicked as wicked could be;

she began to kick them with her feet:

*'It's me who's getting pulled out, not you;
it's my onion, not yours.'*

No sooner did she say it than the onion broke.

And the woman fell back into the lake.

And the angel wept and went away."

The onion, representing her act of God, her act of mercy,

was strong enough to save her

and all her neighbors, together,

yet not enough to save only her.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!