

"A Song of Life"
Psalm 49/Luke 12:13-21
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I. Text-The text today, Psalm 49, speaks of "singing the answer to a riddle to the music of a harp." And so I thought it would be interesting to hear the text in song this morning. You will find it on an insert in your bulletin (See Appendix). Follow along as the choir sings it for us this morning. Psalm 49:1-7, 9-10, 13, 15.

II. Introduction-I wrote my first paper in Mrs. Rofler's second grade class. It was one page long, written with those big #1 pencils, and on that wide spaced paper with the dotted lines between the solid lines. I labored over it, and then proudly gave my mom this wonderful work of literature to read. She read it, and said the normal "encouraging mom thing; "This is very good.....except...." "Except!" I said. I was not prepared for "except." "Except," she said, "you need to correct the beginning of the story. You've written, 'Once a pond a time.' It should say, 'Once upon a time.'" Well, I can't believe it now.....but I argued with her. "No," I said. "I know 'a pond' is right. You know, 'Once a pond a time.'" I was so sure I was right. Well the discussion continued for a while.....until my mom went and got a book, and showed me. There it was, "Once upon a time..." I wasn't pleased that my one page story had eraser marks between those wide lines. But that was all about pride. Sometimes the truth is like that. It would have been much worse to see the "red pen" of my teacher, Mrs. Rofler, and say "If I'd only known."

I got an invitation to participate in the PC (USA) Credo program last week. It's a type of 'mid-career' check-up and evaluation. It's an eight-day retreat with about 30 other pastors and various experts, and there's an evaluation of your physical, vocational, emotional and financial health. I'm going to participate, but I know what I'll hear: "Glenn, you should lose about 15 pounds.....exercise more.....work less.....save more.....and think about developing another hobby or two." It's not exactly what I want to hear, but the truth is sometimes like that. And I'd hate to be 70 and say, "If I'd only known."

Our text from Psalm 49 is like that. On this stewardship Sunday it tells the truth.....perhaps not exactly what we might like to hear. But better now than at some time in the future when we might say, "If I'd only known." It's a song of life.....God's way of life.

III. Brief Exegesis

A. Psalm 49

The song begins with an invitation.....a summons to all people.....all inhabitants of the earth. "Come....come all you who hear this song. Come gather around; high and low, rich and poor, Ivy League graduates and part-time students, Porsche owners and pick-up truck drivers, CEO's with "golden parachutes" and those "laid off" in this recession.....come. Listen to me and I'll sing about truth.....I'll answer your questions.....I'll share wisdom that will change your life."

So now crowd gathers around the singer. It's as diverse as he hoped; rich and poor, comfortable and anxious, those who will never have enough, and those who do. It's one group.....and that's good. It's what the singer hoped.....because it's one song for all people.....one size that fits all.

"Don't fear" he sings. "Don't fear." The crowd is puzzled. They look at each other. "What does he mean, 'Don't fear?'" The singer continues. "Don't fear the faithless rich get the last laugh. Don't fear that those who have lied and cheated their way to McMansions will win in the end. Don't fear that those who put their trust in money will boast at the end of the day. There is a great leveler. There is a great equalizer. There is a level playing field."

By now the crowd is listening....they're wondering....they're thinking. "Is there really something like that.....something that resets the clock.....something that puts us all at the same place so that what we drive, and where we live, and what we do, really makes no difference? What could that be?"

The singer smiles and continues. He knows he has their attention. "Don't fear," he sings. "No one can take it with him or her. Not you....or you....or me. We can't give God a payoff to extend our days. We can't cash in a CD to avoid the grave. Wealth makes no difference. We can't buy eternal life. Those who trust in their wealth.....who live only according to their wealth.....who determine life only by their wealth.....who try to secure their lives against death with their wealth. ...are fools. For in the end.....it will be left to others."

By now the gathered crowd is silent. Some are thinking about their lives and values. Others have their heads down.....feeling a little guilty. And others are angry.....turning to leave.....not wanting to think about the song.....not wanting to change. Sometimes the truth is like that....bumping into pride.

But the singer has one more verse to sing.....an unexpected encore. Up to now he has sung what he has seen. Now he sings what he believes.....what he trusts.....what he hopes. It's a statement of faith. His voice soars.....he's saved the best for last. "But God will ransom my soul from death.....God will welcome me home beyond the grave. I live trusting God.....and will die trusting God.....not wealth. And so it is with the wise.....while the rest will stand at the end and say "If I'd only know." And with that the song becomes a song about how to live.....a song about life.

B. Luke 12:13-21

I haven't read it anywhere, but I think Jesus had this Psalm in mind, or at least this theology in mind, when he tells the parable of the rich fool. In the story two brothers come to Jesus arguing about their inheritance. As a rabbi with authority, they want Jesus to settle the matter. However, the answer they get is surprising. Jesus sees behind the claim of justice and fairness to the real issue; greed.....greed, and the way money twists priorities in life.

So Jesus tells a story. He doesn't sing, but I think he has Psalm 49 in mind. He tells the story about a man who is a very successful farmer. In fact, he's so successful he needs to build bigger barns so to store his crops. He's worked hard to get to this point. He's sought security in life by working, saving, storing, banking. Now, finally, he thinks he might have enough. It all makes sense to us.

But then the voice of God comes as a surprise. The man's life on earth will end this night, and then where will all his wealth go? He can't take it with him. He can't extend his life with his wealth. Like all people, he can't avoid death. The voice of God in the parable calls the man a fool. He has worked, and strained, and saved for the wrong things. If he'd only known.....if he'd only known over the years what he knows now. In the final verse Jesus drives the point home: "So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:21) Like the song in Psalm 49, the parable is about how to live.....a story about life.

IV. Reflection

I've been thinking about a story I recently read in Mark Labberton's book, The Dangerous Act of Worship. Mark was the Senior Pastor at 1st Presbyterian Church-Berkeley, and recently has become a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. Jeanne and I met Mark at a seminar in Malibu, CA last summer. The story goes like this:

"One day I was walking down Telegraph Avenue, the main street for students at the University of California in Berkeley. A young man who looked like a graduate student stopped me and introduced himself. He had a couple prominent neck tattoos and buzzed hair. He said he had been at UC for a couple years and had stumbled into our church's worship services on his own. He explained that he was a skeptic, that he had no religious background and quite a lot of anti-Christian bias, politically and

theologically. He had been a professional rock musician, dabbled in various religions, and now had returned to graduate school while he tried to figure out who he was and what he really wanted to do with his life.

The young man told me he couldn't connect with our contemporary services, but he could connect with the tone and style of our traditional services. He's recently been asking himself some of life's biggest questions about truth, love and justice, and he was trying to find a church that would welcome him as well as his questions. He said, 'I hate the Christian right thing. Don't get me wrong, I think the world is going to hell too, but I think I'm supposed to do something about the places of real suffering. So far, the churches that match my politics haven't helped me with what I wonder about most: Is there really a God? Can we know if Jesus was God in human flesh? What difference would it make to follow Jesus?' He continued, "I think if I got clearer on some of that, I would know why my life matters and how I am suppose to live. I can find lots of people in this town that are like me. What I need instead is to find some people that are like Jesus. Is your church that kind of place?" (Pp. 51-2)

Looking for some people who are like Jesus.....is your church that kind of place? In this season of stewardship we are invited to ask that question; do people see Jesus in our use of time, gifts and money? The song of life in Psalm 49 invites us to ask that question. Jesus' parable of life in Luke 12 invites us to ask that question. Next Sunday we'll talk about money. Today we have an invitation to think about our use of time and abilities in our 24/7/365 way of life. Are we different than the culture around us? Does anyone see Jesus in our ways of life? Is First Presbyterian Church that kind of place.....and if so, are you part of it? Blessed are those who hear God's song of life, and believe it.

V. Appendix

*Verses to be read, or sung by a cantor. Refrain sung by choir.

Refrain "God is our refuge; God is our strength."

Verses

- 1-Hear this, all you people!
Give ear all inhabitants of the world.
- 2-All you who are low and high,
All you who are rich and poor together.
- 3-For my mouth shall speak wisdom;
And the reflection of my heart is full of understanding.
- 4-I will turn my mind to a proverb,
I will solve this riddle to the music of the harp.

Refrain

Verses

- 5-Why should I fear in troubling times,
When the sin of the faithless surrounds me,
- 6-Those who put their trust in their riches,
Those who boast of their abundance and wealth?
- 7-There is no ransom we can pay for our lives,
Nor wealth we can give God to avoid death.
- 9-We cannot buy life without end,
Nor avoid the coming of the grave.

Refrain

Verses

- 10-Remember this; even wise people die,
Just like the fool and the stupid.
All of them will perish,
Leaving their wealth to others.
- 13-Such is the fate of the foolhardy,
The end of those who are pleased with their wealth.
- 15-But God will ransom my soul from death,
For God will receive me beyond the grave.

Refrain