

The First Reading – Psalm 100

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;^[a]
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Was there joyful noise on Thanksgiving for you? Was laughter part of your day? Or maybe tears were more prevalent, as there was an empty seat at your table for the first time. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, is often ripe with memories, expectations and emotions. It is a season of joy for some and for others a season of dread.

I don't know where your emotions find you on this Sunday morning after Thanksgiving, but I do know that the psalmist has charged us to "Make a joyful noise to the Lord." The psalmist declared to the gathered faithful, "Know that the Lord is God. Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and God's courts with praise."

The psalmist is reminding us to reach deep into the reservoir of our faith, especially if our circumstances are not what we would want. Remember says the psalmist, "God is good." Remember that God is the one who has given you the gift of life. Remember that God created you in God's own image and has called you to partner with God in caring for all of creation. Remember that God's steadfast love and faithfulness will endure forever and ever, from generation to generation, for God is good.

No matter what our circumstances are this morning, let us heed the psalmist's words and hold fast to God's goodness, trusting that God's steadfast love and faithfulness will carry us through today, tomorrow and forever.

As we turn to our **Second Reading** from the New Testament, it seems to me that Apostle Paul has heeded the psalmist's words. Listen for God's word for us today from **Ephesians 1:15-23**:

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love^[a] toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰ God^[b] put this power to work in Christ ²¹ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and

power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Raise your hands if you braved a Black Friday Sale! I have a confession to make. I have never been a shopper, as I don't really like shopping. So, my first Black Friday experience is indelibly etched in my memory. My mom and I braved the retail stores when I was a young teen, and I haven't braved another Black Friday since! Of course, Black Friday is no longer just about a sea of cars and huge crowds at brick and mortar stores.

In 2016, \$1.93 billion was spent online on Thanksgiving Day, this year consumers spent \$2.87 billion! Black Friday online sales increased from \$3.34 billion in 2016 to \$3.54 billion by 8 p.m. Eastern time this year. And we haven't even made it to Cyber Monday, which only debuted in 2005. Last year, consumers spent \$12.8 billion on line between Thanksgiving Day and Cyber Monday and it appears this year consumers will spend even more!

With our Thanksgiving tables cleared, the commercialization and consumerism of the December religious and cultural holidays including Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanza blare buy, buy, buy. Sales gimmicks will lure us into buying things we don't even need!

So, whose sheep, are we?

I don't know if you have heard about #GivingTuesday? But, a couple of charities came together in 2012 to challenge our consumeristic tendencies bent on buying things we may not even need. The Tuesday after Thanksgiving is now dedicated to giving, although charitable giving on this day is in the millions, not billions. In 2016, \$168 million was donated on Giving Tuesday or 1.3% of what was purchased between Thanksgiving Day and Cyber Monday in 2016. Charitable giving on Giving Tuesday, pales in comparison to our spending.

So, let me ask that question again. Whose sheep, are we? Or what gods with a little "g" have we pledged our allegiance to? Whose voice will we follow, given all we have and all we are?

Last Sunday we began to receive our individual commitments for 2018. We were asked to consider our commitments in three areas: how will we give ourselves to the ministries of this church; how will we give of ourselves in service to the community; and how will we give financially to this church? If you haven't had the opportunity to turn in your commitments there is still time, as your Session will gather on December 11th to review your commitments and finalize our plans for the coming year. If you need a form, they are in the narthex or the church office.

But back to Apostle Paul. Listen to his words to the church at Ephesus, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your love toward all the saints." The church's outpouring of love was evident beyond itself. News about their generosity and steadfast commitment to Christ had traveled beyond the walls of the church. Their faith was evident to others through Christ's immeasurable power at work through their words and deeds.

What about us? Who has heard about our faith in Christ Jesus? Who has heard about our love for others? What do others in our community say about this particular Church? Is their evidence of generosity beyond ourselves? Do our words and deeds bear witness to Christ's immeasurable power at work through our us?

Apostle Paul said he could not cease giving thanks for the church at Ephesus. And I wonder who gives thanks for us?

I know the parents of the children being tutored on our campus since September give thanks. Opening our location and leasing rooms to a tutoring organization for special needs children has made life easier for the parents. Some of the parents had traveled hours each way to receive the tutoring that has been available on our campus for about 10 weeks.

When our campus was filled with young musicians over the summer for two weeks we received thanks. Violins and trumpets, flutes and cellos played by students aged 8 to 14 filled the air, as the Redlands Symphony's two-week music academy was held on our campus.

Letters arrive from organizations that benefit from our charitable dollars at work in the local community – Family Service Association of Redlands, Youth Hope, Salvation Army, The Veteran's Hospital, and more. People beyond the walls of this church remember us and give thanks.

Yet, can we see exactly what it is that Christ is calling us to do? Do we fully grasp the immensity of Christ's power at work within us? Are we really willing to trust Christ with all of who we are and all of what we have as a church?

This is what the reign of Christ or what Christ is King means for this church and for our individual lives. Yet, I will be the first to admit that entrusting my life completely to the God I claim, is difficult. I like believing that I have some control over what I do or don't do with my life. Basically, I like being in the driver's seat.

But, then I remember Paul's words to the church at Ephesus, "May you receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know the hope to which you have been called and the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power at work within you." Or as Paul prays a few chapters later, "Now God, who by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

This letter and this day of the church year we are reminded that Christ reigns. As biblical commentator Clifton Black writes, "If in fact God has made Christ the King, then no other power on earth is sovereign and deserves our ultimate allegiance: neither the United States nor political parties nor Wall Street, neither commercialization nor consumerism nor buy, buy, buy; neither denominations nor a brand of worship nor the way things are. All other gods with a little "g" collapse under Christ as king and head of the church.

Christ reigns every Sunday, but on this particular Sunday we take a moment to reflect on those gods with a little "g" that claim our allegiances as individuals and as a church.

I admit the little gods of comfort and security often take center stage in my life. So, do the gods of consumerism, as I have way more than I need. What little gods clamor for your allegiance? What little gods clamor for our allegiance as a church? Are we bowing down to the little god of least resistance by doing what we have always done as a church? Are we paying homage to the little god of comfortable faith?

If Christ is King, then we are not helpless in the face of all that is not right in this world. We are conduits of Christ's immeasurably great redemptive power. Through the power of Christ at work within us, we can and will transform lives, even if only one at a time.

I don't know if any of you know Police Officer Brad Grantz, he is one of four officers working with those in our community who are struggling with homelessness. He is working with our local pastors and he has a vision of how to address homelessness one person at a time. He is

recruiting local church members who are willing to engage just one person who is struggling with homelessness for an extended period of time. Training will be provided. And then there will be an expectation that the church member will engage an individual, listen to their story without judgement, and ask what they need as they envision his or her future. He imagines Redlands becoming a community where those on the street know that they will be engaged by community members and known by name. They will be befriended and over time encouraged to see a new future for themselves.

The problem with Grantz' vision is that most people of faith in this community are afraid to step into this type of ministry. I know that I was at one time, too. Yet, during my five years of working with those struggling with homelessness, I was the one transformed. Those I encountered enlightened my heart and I began to see more clearly the Christ in each person I encountered. Their stories were varied and broken, yet I was able to see glimpses of the beloved child God has created them to be.

Apostle Paul reminds us through his letter to the Ephesians that nothing in all of creation is sovereign. Not our fears, not the powers and principalities of our time and place that clamor for our allegiance. We do not have to be afraid to enter into the messy work of Officer Grantz world.

Office Grantz's heart is enlightened by Christ's love. He knows that it is only by the immeasurably great redemptive power at work through him that lives will be changed. He knows it is not his effort alone that make his work possible.

I wonder if anyone in this church will lay aside his or her fear and engage in this work that is so desperately needed right here in our community? Will we dare to entrust our life to Christ and risk stepping out in faith?

What about as a church? What will we risk given that Christ is sovereign? Will we just keep doing what we have always done? Or will we dare to entrust our corporate life to Christ and risk stepping out in faith? Will we try new things and be willing to fail? Will we risk what seems impossible, trusting that God's power at work within us can do abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine?

Friends, Christ is Sovereign, so we have nothing to fear. As Apostle Paul once wrote, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

It is not easy to let go of the little gods that clamor for our allegiance, whether it is our need for more stuff, our comfort, our security or the way things are. Yet, if Christ is Sovereign, Christ is not just asking for some, but for all of who we are and all of what we have. Christ doesn't just want a part of our lives, Christ wants our all. So, will we trust Christ with our all?

This last day of this church year through Paul's word to the Church at Ephesus, we are challenged to us entrust our lives ever more fully to the One whose name is above all names, the One who is head of the church here and now, and forever and ever, for "God is good!" Whose sheep, are we? Christ's alone! Amen.