

November 19, 2023 Commitment Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 90

"Prosper the Work of Our Hands"

Douglas T. King

I am going to let you in on a little secret this morning, but let's keep it just between us. I think church is a bad idea. It is an ill-conceived concept. The whole structure is designed to fail much more often than it will ever succeed in doing what it is supposed to do.

Now let's see if I can sell you on this. Forget your assumptions about church being a good thing, which I believe you have because you are sitting here this morning rather than home in your pajamas. So, a collection of people get together, a collection of deeply flawed people by the way. These people get together and create an institution with rules, and governance, and buildings, and committees, and task forces. And what is the purpose behind all of this? The purpose is to worship and learn about and serve a God who, as the Scotts Confession teaches us is, "eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible..." What could possibly go wrong?

So we gather here today to celebrate eighty years of being the church here in Ladue. Of being a deeply flawed bunch of humans who have tried to organize ourselves to be in relationship with the ineffable creator of the universe. And through every pastors' missteps, every ill-advised committee decision and every cranky congregation member, we are still indeed the church. And not only that but a church that has

countless glorious memories worthy of celebration. How is that possible?

I was pleased to discover the Ninetieth Psalm was our lectionary reading for the day because I believe the answer is to be found there. This psalm attributed to Moses speaks eloquently to both the majesty of our God and to our foibles and limitations, both of which Moses knew a little bit about.

The psalm plays out in three movements. The first movement is a celebration of the majesty of our God, "from everlasting to everlasting you are God." Or, as Francis Bacon expresses it in his poem on the psalm, "the line of time—it doth not measure thee." (Weider, p. 137) The divine is boundless, beyond any calendar we can conceive. And this first movement also includes a gift to us, a reminder of our place with this boundless God, who is "our dwelling place in all generations." Francis Bacon writes, "thou art our home to whom we fly." (Weider, p. 137)

The second movement brings us a powerful and haunting juxtaposition. We are given another reminder. We will, one and all, be turned, "back to dust." And not only that, we hear of God's anger for all of the ways we have failed at being who we have been called to be. It would be easy to throw up our hands in despair at this point and slip into nihilism.

Facing the reality of our limited time and our limited abilities, we are presented with a fundamental decision about our lives. With the few days we have we fumble and bumble and let the divine down on a regular basis. In the face of these limitations do we descend into despondency? But the psalmist directs us to a different path. He calls us out to God that we be taught "count our days that we may gain a wise heart." He

stands with the existentialist philosophers who view our limits as an opportunity to find great focus.

In the midst of our limitations what gives us the audacity to call upon God in such a manner? Welcome to the third movement in the psalm. We are told of God's steadfast love, what we will come to know as grace in the New Testament. Our only hope of counting well our days, of having wise hearts, of accomplishing anything in this world, rests upon God's steadfast love. It is only the power of God's grace that allows us to engage in worthy activity; to live lives of integrity and purpose; to work together to be the church, the body of Christ. The final plea of the psalmist is our one true hope. "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!"

This shared endeavor of ours, of being the church for the past eighty years and for the years to come, is completely absurd. And yet, for some reason God is a big fan of the absurd. We could list a whole collection of societal factors and trends that would suggest the church is dying. And it would indeed die soon if it were left solely in our hands. This building would crumble into dust if we were the only ones who were acting as the architects, the builders, and the maintainers. But we do not fear, we persevere, because we have been told that the Lord is our dwelling place in all generations. This community would wither away if it were dependent upon our ability to be steadfast and true and loving. But we do not fear, we persevere, because we have been told of God's steadfast love; of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ. Our future would be bleak if it were up to us to envision what we will become in the years ahead. But we do not fear, we persevere, because we have been told God's Holy Spirit

will inspire and guide and tug us by the lapels if necessary into the future that awaits us.

The late great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said it more eloquently than I ever could..

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness." (Niebuhr, p.63)

Today as we celebrate so many remarkable memories in the life of this congregation; as we marvel over the photos and share the stories of days gone by; and as we welcome little Bellamy into the family of faith in baptism; as we make our pledges of our resources and ourselves for the year to come we are little like the Roman God Janus who had two faces one looking toward the past and one looking toward the future. But in whatever direction we look, the view is exactly the same. We see the grace of God's steadfast love to be found in every day that has past and every day to come.

Here we are, mired in all of our imperfection of past mistakes and awaiting future challenges we have not even begun to perceive. Church is indeed a crazy, over-reaching notion. We can spot every crack of imperfection. But we do not fear, we persevere, because somehow saturated in God's grace. And that grace finds its way into every nook and cranny of our life

together. Whatever we get wrong, the divine is in the process of making right.

Today we celebrate how God's grace has provided eighty glorious years of being a faithful community. So let us count well our days. Today, we stand strong in the reality that the next eighty years will be glorious in God's continuing grace. "O Lord, thou art our home to whom we fly." Indeed. "Prosper the work of our hands." Indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Irony of American History*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1952.

Wieder, Laurance, *The Poets' Book of Psalms*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1991.