

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH

Sunday July 17, 2022 | 6th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: "Limits"

Within this life is time, and within time is a limit not all notice, but once you do it changes all... Life's time.

~Anonymous

1st LESSON: Psalm 82

One: God stands in the council of heaven,
In the midst of the Gods gives judgement.

**All: "How long will you judge unjustly,
And favour the cause of the wicked?"**

One: Give justice to the weak and the orphan,
Maintain the right of the lowly and destitute.

**All: Rescue the weak and the needy,
Save them from the hands of the wicked.**

One: You neither know nor understand;

**All: You go about in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.**

One: I say then to you: "Gods you all may be,
And offspring of the Most High;

**All: But you shall die like mortals,
And fall like any of the mighty."**

One: Rise up, O God, and judge the earth,

All: And take all the nations as your possession!

2nd LESSON: Luke 9: 37-43, 46-48 (NRSV)

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.'

Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.'

While [the boy was] was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

[Later,] an argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'

SERMON: "Limits"

Psalm 82 is one of the oldest bits of writing in scripture, one of the most interesting and, one of the most heart-wrenching. We are used to understanding God ever since the medieval scholastic period in terms of God's three perfections – God as eternal, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

And yet, when we look at Psalm 82, we see that this 'ain't necessarily so.' Psalm 82 presents us with the early Jewish understanding of what it meant to be the 'chosen people.' It articulates that understanding which Moses had when Yahweh spoke to him on Mount Zion, "You will be my people, and I will be your God." The Psalm reiterates the understanding of the chosen people that there were many Gods, when it says, "God stands in the council of heaven, and, in the midst of the Gods gives judgement." It paints a picture of the God who chose us, who is one of many Gods, who is the one God for us, who argues and cajoles with other Gods in the council of heaven so that ultimately justice might be given to the weak and the orphan, maintain the right of the lowly and destitute, rescue the weak and the needy, and save them from the hands of the wicked.

Psalm 82 presents us with a God who is not all things. Yahweh is our God. Yahweh is all the God we need. But Yahweh is not all powerful. Yahweh has to negotiate with other Gods. It is wisdom and persuasion, and love that are Yahweh's powers.

These are certainly the powers that Yahweh uses in the second half of the Psalm. Yahweh accuses the other powers in heaven of not knowing or understanding the real situation on earth, telling the other Gods that they go about in darkness. Yahweh accuses them of not understanding their own limits. Yahweh says: "I say then to you: Gods you all may be, and offspring of the Most High; but you shall die like mortals, and fall like any of the mighty."

For many of us Psalm 82, in its depiction of a small God, working with and trying to cooperate with even smaller Gods, is shocking. Especially when we realize that underpinning its understanding of God being limited, is the age-old question of why? That age-old question that so many of us wrestle with in the night. Why do terrible things happen? Why do they continue to happen? How can a just and loving God allow them to continue to happen?

In Psalm 82's final words, the Psalmist's plea is agonizing. Yes, I know you are limited, God. Yes, I know there is only so much you can do. But you have more power than we do, God. Use that power. Muster it. Get it together. Rise up, O God, and judge the earth, and take all the nations as your possession!

In other words, the Psalmist says "Yahweh, I know that you are not perfect, but you are the closest thing to perfection we have, so do something. Heal us."

As a student in seminary, Psalm 82 was a Psalm I sat with a lot, because the question of why – what we call Theodicy – the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil is one that, like all Christians, I struggle with. I struggle with the corollary of believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and eternal – when I realize that, if this is the case, something is preventing God from using that power like a magic wand and making everything turn out for the best all the time.

I am not alone. Increasingly theologians avoid talking about God as being all-powerful, although many still cling to the qualities of God as being all-knowing and eternal. Instead of talking about God being all-powerful, they think about the ways that God *is* powerful. And these ways are often small ways. God is powerful because God is Loving. Personal. Present. Listening. Intimate. Approachable. Humble. Understanding. Crying with us. Laughing with us. Powerful in those so many mighty ways, that are not war, not destruction, not smiting, not magic, not Cecil B DeMille cinematic moments. And yet, profound, and able to heal and reconcile and make new. A God that is like Jesus. Powerful like Jesus. A God, who cannot prevent the horror of the cross, but who can take that cross, and make it into something that the powers and the principalities of evil never saw coming.

In our scripture from Luke today, we have a similar interest in limits, and the problem of evil in the world. This time, however, the problem is not so much God's or Jesus' limits, but our limits.

Psalm 82 presents us with the vision of a limited God, who nevertheless gets out there and heals the weak and the vulnerable. A God, who in spite of God's limits, dares to get out there and do something. And in our reading from Luke today, we see this limited human God, doing just that. Jesus heals the sick child that a distraught father brings to him.

And that is lovely. And in this lovely part of this story, we are shown that it is the weak and the orphan, the lowly and the destitute, the weak and the needy, who our smaller God is driven to love and heal.

But we also encounter Jesus, the man-God clearly exasperated with us. The father of this child has asked the disciples to heal the boy. He has begged the disciples to cast the demon out of the boy, but they have not been able to. They have seen themselves as powerless. They have decided that they are too limited. Too weak. Too unlike Jesus to do anything.

And Jesus is not happy about this. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" Jesus says, echoing Psalm 82 – how long must you let bad things continue to happen? Do something. I don't care about how weak you are. How limited you are. Rise up. And use the power that you do have.

How often do we think that we are powerless? How often do we, like the Psalmist, turn to God and make God all-powerful in our minds, and then accuse God of inaction, keeping distance, and not truly caring.

What happens if God does care? If God cares passionately? What happens when Jesus is God – God in a limited human form? A God who can cry and be hurt, and be bruised, bleed, and also laugh with a healing mirth?

What happens if we decide that we are like that God we choose to criticize – if we decide that if God does nothing in that grand, definitive all-powerful way, that we most certainly can't be expected to do anything?

What happens if we forget that Jesus, the man who came to save the world, the one who is saving the world still, was limited in many, many ways? And yet, in spite of those limits, makes a new world possible in our hearts.

The Psalmist tells God to do something, in spite of God's limits. Jesus tells us to do something as well, in spite of our limits. God does something by risking the life of his son. And when we do something, we risk. Risk is what it is to engage in acts of compassion and healing when there is no certainty that we have the power we might want to get the job done.

It is to remember that we can be wounded healers. To take up the cross, as Jesus did, and accept the risk. And, in accepting the risk, realize how beautiful it is.

Henry Nouwen once wrote:

"Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: Who can take away suffering without entering it?"

Jesus did. We can. And in that beautiful risk is all the power and the majesty and the grace and the glory of God.