

Prayer of Illumination
Matthew 28: 16-20, Psalm 107
All Saints Sunday

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God, of steadfast love, show us your ways and teach us your paths. By your Holy Spirit, open our minds that we may be led in your truth and taught your will. Then may we praise you by listening to your word and by obeying it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's New Testament Lesson is from Matthew 28 verses 16-20.

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

Today's lesson is found in Psalm 107. The Psalms were written as hymns and in worship hymns give the invisible presence of God

audible presence. This Psalm, 107 would be sung at a thanksgiving festival. Where the people would remember how they, and their ancestors, had cried out over and over, and God always answered. Much like our All Saint's celebration today, they would be joining together with all the Israelites through the ages to offer thanksgiving and praise to their God of steadfast love.

Steadfast love is an inadequate translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. It's only inadequate because *hesed* is not translatable, it defies definition. *Hesed* is the primary attribute and characteristic of God. *Hesed* is a love that humans cannot fathom or possess, it is singularly God's. It is reliable goodness, helpfulness, and unconditional love. The word reliable is often viewed as pedestrian in our culture. It's defined as consistently good in quality or performance; able to be trusted. God is always reliable and trustworthy. Reliable is what we want in important matters, matters of life and death. We wouldn't want an unreliable doctor or emergency medical technician. One who came at their convenience, or didn't follow best practices. A child doesn't thrive with an unreliable parent or caregiver. Have you ever been left on the soccer field or on the steps of school, after everyone else has left, you know how it feels to question the reliability of someone, even someone you love. You feel abandon. Or if you do not have food on the table, or clean clothing? These are things we take for granted. But most of the world lives in constant unreliability. Whom

can they trust to care for them? We too have parts of our lives that feel unreliable and there are people and institutions that are not deserving of our trust. There is uncertainty in our health, the future, those in the world who hold the power, things over which we have little or no influence. But as children of God we must remember that thru all the uncertainty our God is reliable. Reliability is seen throughout this psalm as lifesaving and life giving.

Our passage today follows a cyclical pattern and is only about a quarter of Psalm 107. The people find themselves in desperate situations, they cry out to the LORD, God redeems them, and the people then offer thanksgiving and praise. This happens four times, in four different situations, to four different groups of people. This is a human condition that relates to us all, not just for the Israelites. Our section of the text focuses on the people who are sick thru their sinful or foolish ways. They cannot eat and draw near to death. God heals them and delivers them from destruction. The other cycles of the passage cover hunger and thirst, imprisonment, and stormy seas. But they all wait until they are in the depths of distress before they cry for God. Why do they wait until the last minute before calling on God? They, and we, wait until we have tried to fix it ourselves, relying on our own power before we turn to God.

The people looked away; they relied only on themselves over and over again. Forgetting that God is their redeemer. God has the power

to redeem, not the people. Today we follow this same cycle. We forget that God is always present; God was and is never absent. The Hebrew people, like us, were seeking help from others, or themselves.

When we are afraid we look elsewhere for redemption, something or someone else to save us. We have a hard time seeing that God is with us, but God never does the leaving. We do. As the Psalmist tells us again and again, God has always answered our cry. Perhaps we miss seeing that God is present because God doesn't always answer our cry as we would like. How God redeems is usually a mystery to us, and we struggle with mystery, but we trust the reliable God who has answered us before. If our prayer is not answered as we dream it should be, we can look at the glass as half full, a view through the lens of scarcity, not remembering the abundant steadfast love of God. We become confined by our failure to remember that God is steadfast.

We get stuck in this trap and repeat the same behavior. Where we limit our vision to the solution we want, where we rely on ourselves, forgetting that God has plans far beyond our imagining. In fear we don't see that God is very present, there is life happening all around us, if we don't look for it we might miss what God is doing. Here at First Pres we sometimes fear we have traveled off the path, that things are not the same. But thru this view we miss the new seeds sprouting among us. Sprouts of green in the:

- Energy and commitment of the Pre-PNC study group that is gathering to see God's activity.
- The Deacon Visitation Ministry leading the congregation in moving out to care for our homebound
- The Mission Committee reminding us monthly of the work God is doing here
- Rummage volunteers who have heard the call to serve those in need in creative ways and are forging new connections
- We have new small groups forming, and our ongoing study groups continue to meet and welcome
- Even in the numerous funerals and memorials that have been held. This still is the place where people come to cry out to God in their pain, knowing God will answer and that they are not alone
- And our Festival Sundays that are planned and led by the community, not by the staff.

God is at work everywhere, in new movements and in things longstanding. We have cried to the Lord. When we open our eyes and remember the reliability of God we again see that ours is a God of abundance, and we shift the lens from expecting that a need will not be met (from scarcity), to accepting that it is being met (abundance), and find our way to join in. Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday, and I invite you to read the entirety of Psalm 107, looking for where you find yourself in the story. Where have you been lost in the desert, sick

or foolish, or felt yourself lost in a sea you did not know how to navigate? Then recall how you cried to God, and how God's steadfast love was there. Celebrate the reliability of God, and offer up to the Lord your gratitude for this redemption.

The Hebrew people would sing this song at a thanksgiving festival and they would remember how they had cried out, and how God always answered. Because how else would the God of Steadfast love respond? Today is our day of remembering and giving thanks for those saints who came before us, those who helped us see God when we were lost in the wilderness. Those who helped us find God at the beginning, and traveled with us on our journey of faith, who reminded us of God's steadfast love. And like the people who were loath to eat anything and drew near to the gates of death, God was there for them, to heal, and God is here to heal us. God sent his son Jesus Christ to show us that God redeems, and today as we gather from the east and the west, and the north and the south we will come to Christ's table to be fed. God's reliable steadfast love is always and forever offered to us again and again.

When we remember the life giving promise that we hear in the Psalm, to call on the steadfast love of God, we understand that we have a part in this as well. Christ relies on us to be his hands and feet. In this Psalm we hear the echo of Christ's commandment and expectation. In the end we will be judged on whether we offered drink

to the thirsty and food to the hungry, did we visit the prisoner, support the downtrodden, sit with the sick and dying, were we the loving neighbor we are called to be?

We can do all this because we know of God's steadfast love. The *hesed* of God is a characteristic for which we need to strive. We hear again the promise of God's steadfast love in Christ's promise to the apostles in Matthew. Christ tells them that he is with them always, to the end of the age, and he is with us as well. Amen.