

The Rev. Dr. Cornel Barnett
 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
 September 23, 2012

Luke 13:10-17
 "Praising and Rejoicing"

It's amazing how "praising and rejoicing" and variations thereof are combined in brief passages and poems.

The biblical passage just read contains the words "praising and rejoicing."

The bulletin cover quote includes the words "praising and rejoice."

A poem by W. H. Auden contains the verbs, "to rejoice and to praise." The poem is called "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." Auden writes:

Follow, poet, follow right
 To the bottom of the night,
 With your unconstraining voice
 Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
 Make a vineyard of the curse,
 Sing of human unsuccess
 In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
 Let the healing fountain start,
 In the prison of his days
 Teach the free man how to praise.

Theology professor and Presbyterian pastor, Robert McAfee Brown, quotes the poem in his book, *Persuade Us to Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction*. He tells a story from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Leaf by Niggle*. Niggle is obsessed with the painting of a landscape with a tree that he cannot finish. His inability to say no to a neighbor and an on-going feeling that with a little more work the painting could be better the picture is never completed.

He dies and finds himself in a strange land and after a few adventures he notices that things are vaguely familiar. Has he been here before? At one point in his wanderings he looks up and is so astonished that he falls off his bicycle. For there, in all the fullness of its three-dimensional glory, is his tree – finished as he imagined it countless times if he had the time to complete it.

Tolkien writes: "He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted up his arms and opened them wide. 'It's a gift!' he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the results; but he was using the word quite literally." Brown writes that the presence of the finished tree persuades him to rejoice.

Brown goes on to say that reasons to rejoice are hard to come by these days. All of us have private and public lists of woes that continually threaten to consign joy, laughter, rejoicing, and praise to the scrap heap. In a world of savage wars, exploitation, civil strife, refugees, unemployment, homelessness and drugs a summons to rejoice seems unrealistic if not uncaring.

And yet the summons is issued. It is issued (as Auden reminds us) from the world of artistic sensibility and it is issued (as frequent exhortations to “rejoice, give thanks, and sing” remind us) from the world of religious sensibility as well.

The poet, Auden reminds us, must risk being honest about our plight, going “to the bottom of the night,” where things are bleakest. It is in the midst of just such deprivation that the poet must “still persuade us to rejoice.” Auden insists that no matter our situation both the call to rejoice and the call to praise are valid.

Christianity and its root, Judaism, insist the same. Praising and rejoicing are essential for a vital faith. We see it in the beautiful poems, prayers and songs of the Psalms where praise often emerges from the struggles of life and in response to an amazing, saving and healing God.

Psalm 40: 1-3 states: “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.”

Psalm 92:1-2: “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night...”

The Psalms are filled with praising and rejoicing.

We also see it the gospels so amply expressed in today’s text. A debilitating spirit has disabled a woman for 18 years. Jesus sees her and calls her over and tells her that she is set free from her ailment and when he touches her she immediately stands up straight and praises God.

We praise God because God frees us from spirits that oppress us. We praise God because God visits us with love, caring and compassion in Jesus through prayer, worship and his loving community. We praise God because Jesus shares with us a mandate to “...bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.” (Matthew 4:18).

At the end of today’s gospel text Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the religious elders who criticize him for healing on the sabbath. “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

The text continues: "When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." We rejoice because God is among us in courageous advocates for truth.

Auden reminds us that praising and rejoicing are in each of us in spite of our travails and he praises the poet Yeats for his ability to generate such praise and rejoicing. The Psalmist reminds us that God meets us in the miry bog and lifts us up and we praise and rejoice. He reminds us that God saves us again and again. Jesus proclaims an amazing message and heals, and challenges the forces of oppression, and we praise God and rejoice.

The psalmist promises that weeping may linger for the night but joy comes with the morning." (Psalm 30:5). Psalms/Now states, "...my nights of despair resolve into the dawn of new joy."

I remember the amazing joy of the millions of oppressed and disenfranchised South Africans going to the polls for the first time in their lives. I was there in their midst in Soweto as an international election observer with the Reverend Al Sharpton. With great abandon the voters in long lines sang their praises and rejoiced in God. Authorities tried to constrain them because their songs could be construed as political but the people sang on.

Christians played a huge role in liberating the country. Many songs in those lines were Christian songs. One went like this: "What a mighty God we serve, what a mighty God we serve, what a mighty God, what a mighty God, what mighty God we serve." On and on to the voting booths.

God is in the warp and woof of our lives. God is here at Redwoods Presbyterian Church, God is in the church universal and in communities of compassion and care. God is in our pain, in our struggles, in our prayers, songs, individual and corporate lives, in our relationships, our ministry, advocacy and mission.

Poets in and out of scripture and persons in biblical times and post-biblical times persuade us to rejoice. Let us continue to praise God and rejoice in the amazing journey of compassion we call Christianity. Amen.