

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 14 Year C

We discover ourselves in the middle of a courtroom scene. It's what many people face, I fear, as they are escorted into the guarded area where they will approach the judge, feeling doomed before their trial ever begins. The dread of unfair and harsh judgment fills the room, a despair that rips from them any hope their hearts may ever have harbored of mercy envelopes them in a fog, and they may find, it is uncomfortable to even breathe deeply, although they know they must.

The psalmist is claiming this as a court of law, where God has summoned the heaven and earth to the trial of God's people, where God plans to be the judge and punish the nation of Israel for being a forgetful people. We know from the very beginning this is a trial the people of God will never win. For the God, who created the heavens and the earth, calls of all creation near to serve as witnesses against them. The specific charges against Israel, and therefore against us, for we too are God's people, are: your worship is empty, you have forgotten your Creator and you have broken our contract.

I have to imagine there is not one among us who could honestly defend ourselves against these charges. There are times in worship when we say the words by rote, not giving them the space to engage our hearts. There are times when we worry more about what wasn't right or what wasn't to our liking in the service, than the fact we had the opportunity to meet God through Jesus in a profound way.

I imagine if we all do the soul-searching work of noticing when we have forgotten God was our Creator, we need only to look at the numerous times when our ego reigns, when we put our own needs and desires above what God desires from us, or when we acknowledge we tend to be stingy in offering our time, talent, and treasure to God, we know we are guilty of this charge also.

And each time we don't "love God and our neighbor", each time we refuse to forgive, each time we break relationships with others, we break our contract

with God. There is no doubt, that we, like the ancient Israelites, are a forgetful people.

But here's the good news. The court in which God brings suit against us for forgetting God is most decidedly not like any court we have ever or could ever know. This is not the People's Court. It is God's court, where there is no claim or pretense that what is going on here is limited to justice, as humans perceive it. Whereas it is true that we could never win this case God has brought against us, the exercise was never about winning or losing or justice or punishment. It was always and will only ever be about God's love for us – about mercy, about opening the pathway for us to be back in right relationship with God. This is what the judgment of God looks like: mercy, love, forgiveness, and an invitation to wholeness. When we declare our Confession of Need today, we will say, "Compassionate God. We confess our weaknesses and our need for your strengthening touch." Our weaknesses: our forgetfulness of God and each other, and our need for God's strengthening touch. This is what God desires to give us, to touch us with God's holy strength, and to make us whole.

Set within this accusation of empty worship, the psalmist reveals to us the answer for what makes worship full and rich: receiving the strength of God which alone can draw us back into right relationship with God. That's the purpose of worship, coming back into right relationship with God. This should make sense to us as Christians. After all, our worship is focused on the Holy Eucharist, when we receive and take within us the nourishment of the living Christ and we are made holy and whole through Christ's presence. In our post-communion prayer, we acknowledge that we have been fed with spiritual food and we ask for the strength and courage to love and serve the Lord with gladness and singleness of heart. Spiritual nourishment and strength are at the heart of our Holy Eucharist.

So come with me into this crucial moment in our Holy Eucharist when this transformation happens. It is after we have recounted the marvelous and saving acts of God, acknowledged our turning away from God, and then repeat the words of Jesus which we hear anew each week, "On the night before he died for us, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks to you, broke it and gave it to his disciples." and likewise the Words of Institution regarding

the wine. Then in response to this gift from Jesus, we affirm our faith: Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.”

Then we say this line, “We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, (which means we remember that you have saved us) O Father (O, Creator), in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.” These words, “sacrifice of thanksgiving”, come directly to us from the psalm we read today: whoever offers me the sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me. We are back in right relationship with God when we sacrifice or surrender our thanksgiving to God. It really is that simple; and it really is quite complex to do.

So our sacrifice, what we surrender, what we offer, what we most value and most often guard, what is the best of who we are, we lay on that table, alongside the bread and the wine, in thanksgiving to God, to be sanctified by God, to be made holy, so that we indeed can be made right in our relationship with God. The language in Rite 1 gives us the best understanding of what that means, for it says, “We offer ourselves, our souls, and bodies” in response to our salvation, and we do it with thanksgiving, and that restores our relationship with God, which is the purpose of worship.

This act of sacrifice is not to be offered begrudgingly, nor with strings attached, nor to assert our own merit, nor to win God’s favor. It is not to be considered something we lose by giving away, but rather something we are gaining by offering. It’s one of those paradoxes we find so often when we walk with God.

It is a call into deep and meaningful worship; it is a call away from our self-centeredness into utter dependence upon God, our Creator, and it does restore our contract or covenant with God. This sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is our defense against the charges made by God of us of empty worship, failure to acknowledge God as our Creator, and a broken contract.

When we offer ourselves in thanksgiving to God (ourselves, our souls, and our bodies) in that moment, we then enter into the right relationship with God because we are acknowledging that God was and is and will be the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of our lives, and our only possible response to that amazing statement is gratitude. This gratitude in turn, opens the pathway for the seeing of our salvation. For gratitude bears all things, heals all

things, endures all things, and restores all things: relationships, brokenness, emptiness, and despair. All you need to do is to lay your heart on the altar, stretch out your hands to receive, and fall on your knees in thanksgiving.

Finding and living into that place of gratitude for what was, what is, and what could be also heals our relationships with each other, ones which have become broken when we have forgotten each other, when we hurt one another, when we hold grudges against one another, when we are careless with our words, when we overstep our boundaries, when we neglect each other. I think repairing broken human relationships is much more difficult than healing our relationship with God, for God is always a willing partner in reconciliation. That's not always true in human brokenness. Yet when we turn our hearts toward gratitude, we are opening the pathway for salvation, which is a pathway toward love, and reconciliation is always more possible from that place. Our psalmist says, "Our God will come and not keep silence." God will speak from that place of gratitude in our hearts and give us strength to heal our broken relationships. In our gospel reading today from Luke, Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is the kingdom come near: our grateful hearts which contain the power to heal. Amen.