

Psalms 34:1-9, 19-17
October 25, 2009

South Plains

Taste and See

Someone gave us a bottle of wine the other day and I got hooked comparing labels. Did you know that wine can taste oaky, buttery, tannic, ripe, complex (but not simple), gamey, and toasty? With hints of leather, cassis, espresso, bitter chocolate, plums, cherries, pears, currants, and blackberries? If I were a vegetarian, I would want to protest that lima beans and Brussels sprouts are never represented.

The reason for the proliferation of adjectives for wine is clear. Mere words are inadequate. If you want to know, really know what a wine is like, you have to taste it yourself. Then, you can understand. That's the message of Psalm 34. We can use all sorts of words to describe the Lord God, but if we want to really know God, there's only one way: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." This psalm is a catalog of ways to know the Lord. Literally, it's an acrostic from A to Z since every verse of the Psalm begins with a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, from aleph to taw.

As with wine, God is one part of human life that has to be experienced in order to truly know who God is. When I first met Jack, we both knew that we would likely be working together for the next two or three years. As we talked about where we'd been and the people we

recognized in common, Jack had the annoying habit of mentioning a famous name followed by the comment, "He's a personal friend of mine." He wanted me to know that these were not people he had just read about. He had spent time in the presence of these folks, sharing a personal relationship with them. God is personal. We can know about God at a distance, but a personal relationship with God allows for a more intimate knowledge.

The medieval theologian Anselm is famous for a Latin phrase, *credo ut intelligam*, I believe in order that I might understand. That's the difference between a philosophy of religion and the practice of faith. The practice of Christianity understands God as a result of believing. In church we move back and forth between learning about God through study of the scriptures and using the scriptures for worship. We need both the concepts and the experience. But, there is a sense in which "tasting," or experiencing God opens our eyes to "seeing" God and understanding who God is.

The psalm invites us to experience God through the practice of worship and especially prayer. We began our worship this morning with the opening verses of the psalm:

I will bless the Lord at all times;

His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord;

Let the humble hear and be glad,

And let us exalt his name together.

Praising God starts the conversation with a compliment, the acknowledgement that God is worthy of blessing. Indeed, the root of the word for “worship” derives from the word for someone who is worthy. God is worthy of our blessing and praise.

Immediately, the psalmist flips that idea around and says, “My soul makes its boast in the Lord.” Our worth derives from the Lord. The old Lenten hymn sings, “Forbid it Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God.” The anchor of our salvation is the death of Jesus Christ. Just as we in the United States take pride in the sacrifices of the American Revolution, we Christians take pride in the sacrifice of Christ for our sakes. It’s not something we ourselves have done, but what has been done for us. Because of that ultimate sacrifice, we feel a sense of gratitude that impels us to give ourselves in service to God. Our stewardship starts at the foot of the cross. Stewardship, the way we manage our lives, our goods and who we are, starts with what God does for us in Jesus the Christ.

Worship is public. What’s been done for our benefit on the cross encompasses a world of people, all who are willing to give worship to God. “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.” This is Reformation Sunday, celebrating the anniversary of that day 492 years ago when Martin Luther nailed his challenge to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Luther gave up his security as Catholic priest for the sake of the gospel. His counterpart in Switzerland, John Calvin,

spent most of his life as an exile for the sake of the gospel. John Knox, who brought the Reformation to English speaking people in Scotland, spent 18 months as a galley slave as a consequence of preaching the truth of Protestantism. They did not make those sacrifices for my sake as an individual. They gave their time and energy, they risked their lives so that the whole church together could exalt God’s name in spirit and in truth. Despite the bitterness and rancor of their times, they would be absolutely pleased to see the unity of Lutherans and Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, and this past week especially Anglicans, working together, magnifying the Lord with each other.

Of course, our time in history has its own share of troubles. And, each of us has a peculiar and unique bushel of trouble. Therefore, the psalmist offers himself as an example. Be warned that the language is close and emotional, almost embarrassing: “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.... This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord.”

We Presbyterians are famous for our reserve and propriety. We’re called the ‘frozen chosen’ because visitors can sit right next to a Presbyterian in worship and never suspect that we’re alive to God’s presence. Some might say we’re scarcely alive at all. Two comments: First, it takes different strokes for different folks. Second, the feelings are here, in our hearts. Our emotions may be buried a little deeper. The evidence for what we feel

may be disguised. But, once you get to know us, you can learn the signs.

One of my favorite elders is a man in another church who is a typical Presbyterian in his reticence and reserve. He chaired two different committees where we worked together. Every meeting was opened with a reading from scripture and a devotional. Sometimes the devotional was so pedestrian it fell flat. But we did not begin without prayer. I had the privilege of burying his mother. All agreed her death came as a mercy at the end of a long and useful life. With the family seated stoically in front of the grave at the family plot, out of corner of my eye I saw my friend reach down and pat a tombstone. After the service, I looked at that stone. It marks the resting place of the adult daughter they lost to cancer. It was as much as he would reveal about his grief. But, none of his friends ever doubted the depth of his sorrow. He cried to the Lord and was heard. And he magnified the Lord every Sunday.

I have been in church where the minister would not conclude worship and say the benediction until the mission budget was fully subscribed. And, I have seen the preacher write his own check for a special offering, announce the amount he was giving, and challenge those of us in the pews to match his gift. Different strokes for different folks. What we are doing at South Plains for stewardship will be less emotional; but it may be more difficult because we are asking that each giver do an inventory of God's gifts to you: your finances, of

course; but also the less tangible gifts you have received, love, peace of mind, patience, courage, support of friends and all your real wealth. Then, when we have tasted again what the Lord has done, we decide what God would have us give to the church.

The little story of blind Bartimaeus from Mark's gospel always intrigues me. Bartimaeus cried out to the Lord, "Have mercy on me!" What did he mean by that cry? He was certainly persistent; and it didn't take much encouragement from Jesus for him to throw off his cloak, probably his only piece of clothing, and run to the sound of Jesus' voice. It seems obvious that Jesus knew exactly what the man wanted. He was a blind beggar.

It was not enough for Jesus to wave a healing hand in his direction as the man sat on the side of the road. That's all Jesus really needed to do for the miracle of healing. Nevertheless, Jesus asks the redundant and somewhat ridiculous question, "What do you want me to do for you?"

That's a question we each need to answer. What do we want Jesus to do for us? We might well ask, "What's left for Jesus to do for us?" He's forgiven us, and that forgiven life is abundant and joyful if only we will live like forgiven people. That's the rub: how do we enjoy the forgiveness, the life and the hope that is promised in Christ? As we wrestle with that issue, we come closer and closer to the Lord. We begin to taste and see that the Lord is good, indeed.

Like Bartimaeus, we will be confronted in prayer with the opportunity to tell the Lord what we want. We may not get exactly what we've asked for. But, until we ask, we will not draw close enough to taste and see that the Lord is good. Then, we will understand that "happy are those who take refuge in him."