

TEXT: Luke 19:28-40
THEME: Right praise is the fundamental condition for happiness
SUBJECT: Praise
TITLE: Right Praise

Palm Sunday
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Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

The Irish have a saying, “Praise youth and it will blossom.” Something essential to human identity is revealed in praise.

Babies rely on adults to affirm them in life in practical ways with food and other material needs, and also with attention, encouragement and comfort. Both parent and child are shaped in this interaction in which pleasing and being pleased are basic.

Some time ago, after a Maundy Thursday communion service, Sherri and I were enjoying a late dinner in a local restaurant. About half way through the dinner, a young woman in her thirties approached us and said, “I want to share with you what happened to me today. For the first time in six years of working at this particular place, someone expressed appreciation for me and for my work.” Tears were sliding down her cheeks. She was out celebrating.

We never out grow our need for praise. Poet Laureate of the US, Donald Hall, in his 80’s, confined to his recliner, declared that writers, no matter how many prizes they have won, still require praise.

Hall received a thick brown envelop from a cocktail party friend in Ann Arbor, a man who wanted to write novels but who settled for a job in PR. The envelop contained a long, long essay clipped from a literary quarterly in which an unfamiliar professor attacked Hall for everything he had every written - his poems, his children’s books, his memoir, short stories, even a textbook that the professor’s own university had adopted.

In a note that accompanied the clipping, Hall’s old acquaintance said, “I thought you would be amused.” Hall was not amused. From the personals in the *New York Review of Books* he hired a hit man. Now, since Hall was never criminally charged, and since the personals were in the *New York Review of Books*, I assume he meant a literary hit man.

A large number of our most intense experiences as children and adults are related to events and people who have threatened or enhanced our sense of self-worth. Only as we receive love, affirmation and security of various sorts do we begin to have a sense of our own worth and the confidence to develop.

The plea for recognition and affirmation is heard from the cradle to the grave and beyond. The very stones we erect to mark our graves cry out.

Right praise has nothing to do with the manipulation of flattery. Praise is truthful affirmation. Right praise is grounded in recognition and respect. Right praise awakens the more generous side of your heart. It draws out the nobility in you.

Praise works like gratitude. The more we take time to be grateful, the more we discover to be grateful for. When the soul praises, the life enlarges.

We know as individuals how encouraging praise can be. It is like watching nature on a spring morning. At first, the flowers are all closed and withdrawn. Then, ever so gradually, as the rays of the sun coax them, they open out their hearts to praise the light.

The diminishing of praise is an acute poverty of our culture. We have to hope that God is a great deal kinder than we are and stop looking for ways to undervalue others. We have a habit, Marilynne Robinson contends, of thinking only cynicism is honest and that is a terrible blindness.

To recognize worth and to respond to it with praise is to create a new relationship. This new mutual delight is itself something of worth, an enhancement of what was already valued.

There need be no end to this. In right praise there is an awakening of new responses, a yearning for larger capacities of expression and action, and an inspiration for all sorts of generosity and creativity.

Praise enlarges the mind's capacity to understand. There is a knowledge of God that can come only in praising God. Christianity sees praise and adoration of God as the essence of every person's vocation which includes, in appropriate ways, praise of neighbor. Such praise has the power to establish right relationships.

Awareness of great and wonderful things evokes praise and astonishes the mind. From black holes to gene therapy to being overwhelmed by beauty or acts of kindness, our astonished minds open upon larger vistas, deeper truths.

Dante's astonishment at meeting Beatrice produces two results - a sense of reverence and a desire to know more. A noble awe and a noble curiosity come to life. The *Divine Comedy* is a story of the ever maturing interaction of praising and knowing.

What Dante shows is that right praise is not an optional extra in life but is the fundamental condition for happiness and for staying in harmony with reality. The claim is that the intrinsic logic of life and of Christianity are at one in this: only in right praise are truth, beauty, goodness and love appropriately blended and fulfilled.

Recognition and respect, honoring and delight, draw us ever deeper into relationship and understanding, and on into the spiral of love. Jesus knows this is so essential to our humanity that if we fail to praise, the stones will cry out.