

" CELEBRATION!"

(Psalms 98:1-9)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 5-5-24]

--I--

1. Read text responsively from Psalter at UMH#818, Psalms 98:1-9 and Pray.
2. Feliz Cinco de Mayo! Happy Fifth of May!

A--And now that I've said that, I know what many of you are going to be eating for lunch today... Mexican food!

B--But did you know that today's holiday is not really a *Mexican* holiday at all, but an *American* one?

C--It was first celebrated in Los Angeles in 1863 to commemorate a famous Mexican military victory over the French a year earlier, but over the years its come to celebrate the history & contributions of all Latino culture here in the United States, in general. <sup>1</sup>

3. Well, we Americans *love* a good celebration, don't we?

A--Whether it's Cinco de Mayo, a birthday, wedding, anniversary, a job promotion, family reunion, national holiday, our sports team winning a championship, or even *for no reason at all...* we have a knack for celebrating things!

B--Yet, if we go back in time, we find that *we* aren't the only ones who like celebrating.

C--The Hebrew culture of the Bible, for instance, knew well that one of the chief characteristics of humanity is the desire and need to celebrate life with others.

--II--

4. To see what I'm talking about, let's go back to Israel's history in the Old Testament.

A--In the earliest days, the term "Israel" referred simply to a confederation of 12 *separate and independent tribes who shared a common language, heritage, and religion*, but little else.

B--And while some of these tribes would occasionally unite together under the leadership what the Bible calls "Judges," for the most part their lack of central leadership left them open and vulnerable to other military powers in the region. <sup>2</sup>

5. But when Saul united these tribes and was anointed the first King of Israel, and then his successor David began expanding territory by winning victories over long-time enemies, not only did other nations begin to take note of Israel as a political and military power, but they also began to notice Israel's God, as well. <sup>3</sup>

A--In each instance of military victory, David gave credit to God, with today's scripture (Psalm 98) being an example of a poem set to music which celebrates the sovereignty and power of God over all the earth:

1--For example, Verses 1-2 invites the people of Israel to "*sing to Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! God's right hand and holy arm have gotten the victory,... and revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.*"

2--And Verse 3 goes on to say that by and through King David's military successes, "*all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.*"

B--And once David did all of this, he consolidated his leadership further by instituting national holidays and festivals for the people to come together to celebrate and proclaim their oneness under God through the rule of the King of Israel.

1--Just like we here in America have national holidays like Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Veteran's Day, and Thanksgiving,...

2--So King David established festivals like Seedtime, Harvest, Passover (which Jews around the world are still celebrating through this coming Tuesday), New Year, and Pentecost (which we'll celebrate May 19).

6. During these, people would come from all parts of Palestine and converge on Jerusalem for several days, celebrating with their friends & neighbors their common life as a nation.

A--And this sense of *communal* celebration -- the fact that it was done *together with others* -- was one of the keys to the Hebrew experience with God.

B--The notion that one's life and faith could be successfully carried out *apart from* one's connection and relationship *with others* would have been totally *foreign* to them.

--III--

7. Unfortunately, often today it seems that we've lost the sense of the importance of corporate celebration with and connection to *others*.

A--Today we often seem to value our sense of *independence* and *self-reliance* so much that we forget how connected and related we are with *one another*.

B--We've seen this especially over the last few years, where an increasingly self-focused and self-centered world/society has seemed to prioritize the "I" above the "We" -- a culture that puts "*what's best for ME*" ahead of "*what's best for US*."

1--Whether it was in the controversy over wearing masks during the pandemic, the message of "Black Lives Matter," the harm done by many (including many in the church) to those in the LGBTQ community, or today's growing antisemitism & unrest on our college campuses (in the news this past week),...

2--...We tend to think that if an issue or problem doesn't affect, impact, or hurt ME, then it probably doesn't matter, or maybe doesn't even *exist*!

8. Yet, this kind of self-centered way of thinking and living -- a life focused *solely* on our OWN needs and desires, failing to take account of what affects, impacts, or hurts *others* (whether we *agree* with them or not) -- is NOT what we find either in today's Psalm or in the life and teachings of Jesus himself.

A--Verse 9 of today's Psalm tells us that it is "*The LORD [not US, who] will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity*" ... and how does Jesus himself ask it in Matthew 7:3, "*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*"

B--So yes, there is -- and always should be -- a personal dimension/component to our faith. But that faith cannot be ONLY about "*what's best for ME*"! -- there always is (and should be) a "WE" dimension/component to it!

C--And that's why we here at Cornerstone (for example)

- 1--take teams 2x/year to Trinity Table in downtown Atlanta (like we're doing today)
- 2--its why we go on annual mission trips to El Salvador;
- 3--it's why many of us help needy world children through ministries like "Compassion Intl" and "Operation Christmas Child";
- 4--its why we're starting a new ministry this month called "We Care", a lay visitation ministry to keep up with our homebound members;
- 5--and its why (this summer) we'll be helping feed lunch to needy families at Eastgate community in south Newnan.

9. My point, you see, is that life is a celebration of the "WE", not just of "ME!"

A--Verses 4-8 of today's Psalm, for instance, tell that us that *we*, along with *all* of creation, are called to...

*"make a joyful noise to the Lord;... break forth into joyous song and sing praises... to the Lord with the lyre...and the sound of melody! with trumpets and the sound of the horn!.... [For] the sea [to] roar, & all that fills it; [For] the floods [to] clap their hands... [and] the hills sing for joy together before the Lord!"* <sup>4</sup>

B--And just as the celebration of God's goodness in today's Psalm reading was carried out by both creation & the people *TOGETHER*, so ours is to do the same.

1--As you've perhaps heard me say before, "*you can't have a party all yourself*" (except a "pity party", but that's not much fun!)

2--I.E., You and I are NOT made to celebrate God's presence and power *alone or by ourselves*, but *TOGETHER* in community, as the *BODY* of Christ --

3--...NOT necessarily always sharing the same politics, lifestyles or views, but nevertheless *ONE* in our belief & praise for the God who is the Lord of us all!

C--In a devotional article for *The Upper Room*, author Dennis Hammons tells about being on his way to a football game with some friends. They were running late, so the game had already started in the stadium. And as they approached, they could hear the band playing, and the wild cheering of nearly 75,000 fans inside. And Hammons recalls how all that noise made him excited, and how he couldn't wait to get inside and see what was happening! <sup>5</sup>

D--Well, my prayer for this church (and, in fact, for all of God's churches) is that we would be so vibrant, alive, and full of excitement -- so busy celebrating the goodness of God *TOGETHER* -- that others would see and hear about all the great things going on here and *want* to "get in on it"!

10. If we, as God's church, will understand and claim that life is meant to be a celebration of His goodness and presence, then we, like today's Psalm writer, will be able to... "*sing to the Lord a new song -- to make a joyful noise before the King, our God.*"

11. [PRAYER]

12. [HOLY COMMUNION]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> It was first celebrated in by the Hispanic community of Los Angeles, CA in 1863 as a way of remembering Mexico's victory over the French at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. So, it's not really celebrated in Mexico, but only in America. For more information, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2023/05/05/cinco-de-mayo-civil-war/>

<sup>2</sup> And in that day and time, when a nation was weak, it was thought to reflect the weakness of the god they served -- so that's what other nations thought of Jehovah God during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Ancient cultures often associated the reality and power of a culture's god with the success of that culture in military battles. If one was successful in warfare then that nation's god must be powerful as well. But if a nation was militarily, weak, then that nation's god must either be weak, as well, or perhaps even nonexistent. Or so the logic went back then.

<sup>4</sup> How does Jesus put it in Luke 19:40?... if we mortals will not take time to praise God, then "*the very rocks and stones will cry out.*"

<sup>5</sup> April 13, 1991 article from *The Upper Room* devotional guide (<https://www.upperroom.org/>).