

Sermon 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013  
Psalm 119:97-104 Luke 18:1-8 'To Speak and Be Heard'

Prayer: Spirit of God, you do not break in suffering, nor wander from truth, empower us to follow your commands: to know God, to love God's way, to hold back from evil, to hate false ways, to speak your Good News, and to live our ministry fully to the best we can. Amen.

The plan for this sermon is to begin with the few verses we heard of Psalm 119 and some of what it teaches us about living in God's ways, and how it will give joy and blessing and sweetness... So when we hit trouble – like Jesus parable about the widow, we: 1. Have something to hold us; 2. something to guide us; 3. something to keep us going in the right direction; and 4. something the means we can answer Jesus question in verse 8 with an assured 'YES'. And then I have a story to share. It did arrive via the internet so some of you may have heard it – but Good News is important to speak about and needs to be heard, so I am sharing it.

Living in God's ways is what enables us to speak and be heard about the Good News of God in Jesus, it's what enables us to keep going when facing overwhelming difficulties and teaches us to look for the rainbow in the rain! And **living in** God's ways is what Psalm 119 is all about. It is not only the longest chapter in the Bible, it is the longest Psalm as well, and if you want to find the 'middle of your Bible' it will open in the middle of Psalm 119!

While all the psalms are special, Ps 119 is **really** special!!! Each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. Scholars interpret this to mean it is meant to be an A-Z (Alpha to Omega) of the Torah (=God's laws for living) *and / or* that the Torah is complete and all that is needed to guide the life of the faithful. This sense of completeness is seen to be echoed in the ways it includes the parts of the body from the '**top to the toe**'. It speaks of eyes, mouth, heart, soul, tongue *and feet*, eyes – vv. 6, 15, 18, 37; mouth – vv. 13, 43; heart – vv. 2, 7, 10, 11, 34, 36; 'soul' ('myself, body', lit. 'throat') – vv. 20, 25, 28. Each is repeated later in the psalm along with feet – vv. 59, 101, 105 – and tongue – v. 172. **as being necessary** in keeping God's ways - in following and keeping the Torah. The structure of this psalm makes it a **very elaborate prayer**. ->

**It's a prayer** with the key for the best way of living, *which* for a faithful Hebrew, was complete adherence to God's ways. **These ways**, the psalmist says are **the** ways that bring joy and blessings; ways that are **a gift** for us to live in, because in them we have the keys of life. It is our responsibility to learn all about these life keys and use them.

So the psalmist writes of meditating on the law of God. Now just which or *what* laws is never specified so scholars (H Wallace) write that it means more than specific regulations, more than thou shalt's... **rather** that when *all is gathered together*, there is a constant witness to Yahweh-God who **always** is found standing behind His Word – so in this sense "the *Torah*" **can** be the object of love (v. 97) and taste sweeter than honey (v. 103).

For the faithful then, we read about our need to be meditating on the Word, law, statutes, wisdom of God and **absorbing** them into ourselves as we do food – good, healthy sweet food! = honey. They are to be internalised by us and in this way available for us to use when we need wisdom, guidance, advice, knowledge, understanding... So that we can use them not only in our own lives but also to speak about them and be heard by the others in our lives; *whether* that is our family, our friends, our work colleagues, our fellow travellers... We speak about what we know for ourselves, out of our own life experience which has been influenced by this God who always stands behind his Word.

It is this dimension of God, scholars tells us that Jesus is building his use of a 'circulating' story on. **God is always** there, behind his Word and hears the prayers of his people, even when his people disagree, for whatever reason. Jesus, in a parable that could be rather unflattering in its comparisons, says God always hears, and God takes action.

God hears the prayers of his people so we like the widow in the parable must keep faith and **hold on** to our hope for a better outcome, for justice, for God's Word to be in evidence among us. Jesus widens the focus of the story from a widow seeking justice to the whole people of God crying for justice, for change, for the promise of God's kingdom to be made real. (Loader)

Staying with this light on the parable then, it highlights the yearning for change to a more just society. The widow, who in Jesus times was very vulnerable with no income, no male 'protector', and poor, represents those who experience injustice, oppression, arbitrary abuse of power, the cruelty of exploitation... in this light I believe **we** suddenly discover the power of the parable – Jesus is talking to us and our experiences...

In our lives we too have experienced injustice and the arbitrary abuse of power and cruelty of exploitation and although we may well have taken it to the Lord / laid it aside / learnt to forgive – we know what it is. We know these things have a cost beyond dollars and cents. We know they have a cost beyond an emotional count – and today Jesus says they have a faith cost – as well.

I wonder is Jesus' question, at the end of his teaching *using* the story of the unjust judge and widow, where he asks if he will faith on earth when he returns, was prompted because he knew just how high these costs are for us. Will we become overwhelmed and lose the ability to keep living God's way?

In this teaching Jesus says we are to take heart – even from the behaviour of a corrupt judge who has no respect from anyone! Now that's a picture hard to look at! But what is the alternative? – Despair, depression and loss of faith and hope? Loader maintains that "The paralysis of hope can occur at many levels. For many it plummeted with the towers of the World Trade Centre. Faith then retreats into survival mode or fences itself within petty concerns, loses its political and social edge in a sweet jellied peace of mind, or surrenders to the demagogues and demigods of hate."

This is not what Jesus taught – he said God hears our prayers and will respond. And I want to say – **today** – we are here because we know the truth of Jesus teachings and have seen it made real in our lives. We are here because we have triumphed. We have not let the Good News of Jesus be silenced. We **have spoken** and lived the ways of God knowing any success in our ***being heard***, has been because of the grace, mercy and forgiveness of our God in Christ. All that we have achieved is because we tried. All we managed to do is because we did not keep silent and when offered an opportunity we shared the joys, blessings and sheer Good News of our faith.

The Psalmist who wrote 119 would add that we have managed to do this because we have mediated and absorbed the Word of God, and made the right choices. I would encourage us all to take heart, - not lose sight of the challenge to keep praying – nagging God, and not to lose sight of the challenge to make the Kingdom of God real among us.

The story I am about to tell for me is one of encouragement and Good News. This is what we are to be speaking about and praying that we will be heard. And it picks up a real situation where the costs to life and faith were and still are very real. And it is one worth retelling because it is Good News.

Edited:                      A GREAT STORY

Although it is almost 11 yrs since 9/11 this is a story about that terrible day. It comes from Jerry Brown a flight attendant on Delta Flight 15, a true story.

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, we were about 5 hours out of Frankfurt, flying over the North Atlantic.

All of a sudden the curtains parted and I was told to go to the cockpit, immediately, to see the captain. As soon as I got there I noticed that the crew had that "All Business" look on their faces. The captain handed me a printed message. It was from Delta's main office in Atlanta and simply read, "All

airways over the Continental United States are closed to commercial air traffic. Land ASAP at the nearest airport. Advise your destination."

No one said a word about what this could mean. We knew it was a serious situation and we needed to find terra firma quickly. The captain determined that the nearest airport was 400 miles behind us in Gander, New Foundland.

He requested approval for a route change from the Canadian traffic controller and approval was granted immediately -- no questions asked. We found out later, of course, why there was no hesitation in approving our request.

While the flight crew prepared the airplane for landing, another message arrived from Atlanta telling us about some terrorist activity in the New York area. A few minutes later word came in about the hijackings.

We decided to LIE to the passengers while we were still in the air. We told them the plane had a simple instrument problem and that we needed to land at the nearest airport in Gander, New Foundland, to have it checked out.

We promised to give more information after landing in Gander. There was much grumbling among the passengers, but that's nothing new! Forty minutes later, we landed in Gander. Local time at Gander was 12:30 PM .... (that's 11:00 AM EST).

There were already about 20 other airplanes on the ground from all over the world that had taken this detour on their way to the U.S.

After we parked on the ramp, the captain made the following announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, you must be wondering if all these airplanes around us have the same instrument problem as we have. The reality is that we are here for another reason." Then he went on to explain the little bit we knew about the situation in the U.S. There were loud gasps and stares of disbelief. The captain informed passengers that Ground control in Gander told us to stay put.

The Canadian Government was in charge of our situation and no one was allowed to get off the aircraft. No one on the ground was allowed to come near any of the aircraft. Only airport police would come around periodically, look us over and go on to the next airplane. In the next hour or so more planes landed and Gander ended up with 53 airplanes from all over the world, 27 of which were U.S. commercial jets.

Meanwhile, bits of news started to come in over the aircraft radio and for the first time we learned that airplanes were flown into the World Trade Centre in New York and into the Pentagon in DC. People tried to use their phones to get more information – but couldn't. As time passed we heard more news and the passengers got more and more exhausted but stayed calm. We knew by looking, there were 52 other stranded aircraft!

We were told they would let us off the planes one at a time and our time would be 11am the next day. Passengers were not happy but resigned themselves. We were promised medical attention, if needed water and lavatory servicing.

About 10:30 on the morning of the 12th a convoy of school buses showed up. We got off the plane and were taken to the terminal where we went through Immigration and Customs and then had to register with the Red Cross.

The passengers and crew were separated and crew taken to a small hotel. We had no idea where our passengers were going. We learned from the Red Cross that the town of Gander has a population of 10,400 people and they had about 10,500 passengers to take care of from all the airplanes that were

forced into Gander! We were told to just relax at the hotel and we would be contacted when the U.S. airports opened again, but not to expect that call for a while.

We found out the total scope of the terror back home only after getting to our hotel and turning on the TV, 24 hours after it all started.

Meanwhile, we had lots of time on our hands and found that the people of Gander were extremely friendly. They started calling us the "plane people." We enjoyed their hospitality, explored the town of Gander and ended up having a pretty good time.

Two days later, we got that call and were taken back to the Gander airport. Back on the plane, we were reunited with the passengers and found out what they had been doing for the past two days. What we found out was incredible.

Gander and all the surrounding communities (within MATCH about a 75 kilometre radius) had closed all high schools, meeting halls, lodges, and any other large gathering places. They converted all these facilities to mass lodging areas for all the stranded travellers. Some had cots set up, some had mats with sleeping bags and pillows set up.

ALL the high school students were required to volunteer their time to take care of the "guests." Our 218 passengers ended up in a town called Lewisporte, about 45 kilometres from Gander where they were put up in a high school.

Phone calls and e-mails to the U.S. and around the world were available to everyone once a day. During the day, passengers were offered "Excursion" trips. Some people went on boat cruises of the lakes and harbours. Some went for hikes in the local forests. Local bakeries stayed open to make fresh bread for the guests.

Food was prepared by all the residents and brought to the schools. People were driven to restaurants of their choice and offered wonderful meals. Everyone was given tokens for local laundry mats to wash their clothes, since luggage was still on the aircraft. In other words, every single need was met for those stranded travellers. The local Red Cross coordinated everything beautifully.

It was absolutely incredible. When passengers came on board, it was like they had been on a cruise. Everyone knew each other by name. They were swapping stories of their stay, impressing each other with who had the better time. Our flight back to Atlanta looked like a chartered party flight. The crew just stayed out of their way. It was mind-boggling.

And then a very unusual thing happened. One of our passengers approached me and asked if he could make an announcement over the PA system. He concluded his speech by saying that he would like to do something in return for the good folks of Lewisporte.

"He said he was going to set up a Trust Fund under the name of DELTA 15 (our flight number). The purpose of the trust fund is to provide college scholarships for the high school students of Lewisporte. He asked for donations of any amount from his fellow travellers. When the paper with donations got back to us with the amounts, names, phone numbers and addresses, the total was for more than \$14,000!

As I write this account, the trust fund is at more than \$1.5 million and has assisted 134 students in college education.

"I just wanted to share this story because we need good stories right now. It gives me a little bit of hope to know that some people in a faraway place were kind to some strangers who literally dropped in on them. It reminds me how much good there is in the world."

"In spite of all the rotten things we see going on in today's world, this story confirms that there are still a lot of good and Godly people in the world and when things get bad, they will come forward. Will Jesus find faith on earth when he returns? I'd say YES, because his people are speaking and being heard. Amen