



FLOSSMOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

June 19, 2011 - Trinity Sunday

“MIGHTY MERCIFUL”

Psalm 19

Pastor Fred Lyon

“Leonard and Olga Storm were huge Norwegians, and forbidding. I was in awe of them. They never smiled. They exuded a kind of thick, Nordic gloom.”

Thus Eugene Petersen writes about his childhood in Montana. He describes being five-years-old and longing to ride on Leonard Storm’s John Deere tractor.

From a fence at the edge of the Storms’ farm, young Eugene watched Leonard stop his tractor and wave his huge arm. Leonard shouted something that Eugene could not hear clearly from a distance. He thought Leonard was angry. So Eugene ran away and “went home feeling rejected, rebuked.”

Peterson continues: “The Sunday after my disappointment at the edge of his field, Leonard Storm called me over after worship and said, ‘Little Pete, why didn’t you come out in the field Thursday and ride the tractor with me?’ I told him that I didn’t know I could have, that I thought he was chasing me away. He said, ‘I called you to come. I waved for you to come. Why did you leave?’ I said that I didn’t know that was what he was doing. He said, ‘What do you do when you want to get somebody to come to you?’ I showed him, extending my index finger and curling it back toward me three or four times.

“He harrumphed, ‘That’s piddling, Little Pete. On the farm we do things big.’

“I was crushed. I felt small. I was already small on the outside; now I felt small on the inside. Disappointed and crushed. But also a little angry. This gigantic Norwegian farmer calling me and my world piddling.

“A few days after my disappointment at the edge of his field and his reprimand in church, I was back at the fence, watching, hoping I might get a second chance. The giant Norwegian saw me, stopped the tractor, and did it again, made that sweeping motion of invitation. I was through the barbed wire in a flash, running across the furrowed field and then up on the big green John Deere. He let me stand in front of him, holding the steering wheel, pulling the plow down that long stretch of field, my smallness now absorbed into his largeness.”

+++++++

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.” What in the world--to whom in the world--are we telling and proclaiming about God’s glory and handiwork, about the big gesturing largeness of God?

It has been my experience that too many people—believers and unbelievers alike—imagine God’s mightiness being a fearful shadow. But the biblical witness suggests that God more often chooses to exercise God’s might as refreshing shade. God’s might often is revealed through tender mercies that are no less powerful than God’s mighty deeds—tender mercies that are the divine motivation behind the mighty deeds.

God is mighty merciful.

We see this in the opening six verses of Psalm 19, which describe the generous grandeur of the entire created order. The splendor of God’s creation silently speaks for itself, pointing us to its sacred origins. More often than we notice, we are walking on, and surrounded by, holy ground. Holy ground can overwhelm, even frighten us. But when we bravely remain on holy ground long enough, serenity eventually ensues.

Eventually, we come to realize that God the Father—God whose compassion in the original Hebrew literally means “love from the womb,” God the Creator—creates us for faithful purposes, not fearful ones. We may, indeed, be fearfully made by God, but God never made us to be fearful. The glory of God’s creative force speaks of greatness that is measured in graciousness, sovereignty over us that is measured in solidarity with us. Through the awesome wonder

of God's handiwork, all creation gives expression to how the largeness of God would absorb our smallness—not by looming to overpower us, but by loving to provide us an extravagantly life-giving universe in which to thrive and find meaning.

Along with an abundant created order that silently reveals God, Psalm 19 attests to God's desire to be accessible to us through understandable words—not only read, but also declared out loud in worship. In verses 7-13, Psalm 19 discusses Torah. In addition to "law" in Hebrew, Torah also means "teaching." Even more, God seeks to make God's self known, to make God's ways familiar and learnable. Torah not only provides trustworthy spiritual guidance; Torah also alerts us and makes us mindful that the will of God is always nearer than we suspect by way of the sustaining presence of the Spirit of God in our midst. More to be desired than gold, sweeter than honey, the ways of the living Spirit of God articulated through Torah are to be cherished and savored.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned about God being mighty merciful has to do with the very last verse "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto you, O God, my rock and my redeemer." Here, the word "redeemer" comes from the Hebrew, *goel*. One of the literal meanings of *goel* is, "to do the part of a kinsperson." This describes the practice of the dispossessed being taken in and cared for—being redeemed—by next-of-kin, blood relatives. But there are indications that a redeemer could also be one possessing the compassion and courage to step forward and come to the rescue of the orphaned or the widowed or the disenfranchised who are not blood relatives and to treat such vulnerable folks as part of one's own kin—as if they were blood relatives anyway.

What we have here is a mighty merciful model for human relationships. What we also have is the foundation to better understand the redeeming work of Jesus. For the New Testament consistently bears witness to how because of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus the only blood that matters—the only blood that truly connects human beings into authentic relationships—is the blood of our crucified and risen Redeemer. God in Christ redeems us by restoring our loving relationships—treating us like kin, if you will—with God and all humankind. In Christ we experience the mercy of a mighty God who chooses to absorb our smallness into the largeness of the holy—not by looming, but by loving.

And, mercifully, this can mightily change us.

The largeness and expansiveness of somebody like Leonard Storm, the largeness and expansiveness of all who faithfully endeavor to treat everyone like kin, of all who greet strangers as potential new friends—such folks provide a sweet glimpse of the largeness and expansiveness of our big, gesturing God. Indeed, because of such people, we learn that God's mighty deeds and tender mercies are one in the same. One is not better than the other—they complement one another.

Often the mightiest thing we can do is be merciful.

+++++++

In his book, *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor writes about growing up in a Sanctified Brethren congregation, which was frequently in disputes over doctrine because the church was "cursed with a surplus of scholars and a deficit of peacemakers." In the midst of one dispute, Keillor's Uncle Al arranged for church leaders "to meet at his and Aunt Flo's one Sunday, not to discuss the [controversy] but simply to enjoy a dinner of Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken."

Things got off to a tense start right off with the saying of grace. As Keillor describes it: "Prayer was a delicate matter. Brethren were known to use even prayer before a meal as a platform, and so Al the peacemaker, concerned lest one brother take prayer and beat the others over the head with it, said, 'Let us bow our heads in silent prayer, giving thanks for the meal,' and they bowed their heads and closed their eyes and...soon it was clear that neither side wanted to stop before the other; they were seeing who could pray the longest.

"Al said 'Amen,' to offer them a way out of the deadlock, and said it again: 'Amen.' Brother Miller looked up and saw Brother Johnson still bowed, so he went back down just as Johnson put his periscope up and saw Brother Miller submerged, so down he went. It was becoming the longest table grace in history, it ground on and on and on, and then Aunt Flo slid her chair back, rose, went to the kitchen, and brought out the food that they were competing to see who could be more thankful for. She set the hay down where the goats could get it. Tears ran down Brother Johnson's face. His eyes were clamped shut, and tears streamed down, and so was Brother Miller weeping.

"It's true what they say, that smell is the key that unlocks our deepest memories, and with their eyes closed, the smell of fried chicken and gravy made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and a mother's

voice from on high said, 'You two stop it and get in here and have your dinners. Now. I mean it.' The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind, and the stony hearts of the two giants slowly melted; they raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly peace was made over that glorious chicken."

My late father-in-law, Henry Edmiston, would simply put it this way: "Love folks into anything; force them into nothing."

+++++++

The world cries out for redemption. Whether with sweeping gestures or gentle assurances, we who profess to be redeemed already are called to be agents of holy invitation who boldly beckon the world to come experience how mighty merciful our Redeemer Christ is.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."

We have speech. We have words. We can make our voices heard. And we can back up what we say by speaking volumes in the way we conduct our lives through compassionate, loving, merciful action. If we do not make our voices heard, if in the way we think, speak, and act we neither tell others about the glory of God nor proclaim God's handiwork to a world searching for good news, if we communicate nothing of the mighty deeds and tender mercies of our Redeemer Christ—why, then...why even bother being a church?