

Psalm 105: 1-9 “Hand-Me-Downs” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/21/21

John Schlatter was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who believed in handing down more than just book knowledge. He passed on practical bits of wisdom that came in quotation form from great historical thinkers. He remembers one student, Alan, who as he put it, majored in “trouble” with a minor in suspensions. He had studied how to be a bully and was getting his master’s in “thievery.” Every day in class, John had his students memorize a quotation from a great thinker. As he called roll, he would begin a quotation. To be counted present, the student would be expected to finish the thought. For example, he would call out “Alice Adams – ‘There is no failure except...’” Alice responded, “‘In no longer trying...’ I’m here, Mr. Schlatter.” So by the end of the year, his young charges had memorized 150 great quotes such as “Think you can, think you can’t – either way you’re right!” or “If you can see the obstacles, then you’re taking your eyes off the goal,” or “A cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing,” and, of course, Napoleon Hill’s “If you can conceive it, and believe it, you can achieve it.” No one complained about this daily routine more than Alan – right up to the day Alan was expelled and John lost touch with him for five years. Then one day, the student called John to tell him he was in a special program at one of the neighboring colleges and had just finished parole. He had spent time in “juvie” and was shipped off to the California Youth Authority for his antics. He had become so disgusted with himself that he had taken a razor blade and cut his wrists. He said, “You know what, Mr. Schlatter, as I lay there with my life running out of my body, I suddenly remembered that dumb quote you made me write 20 times one day. ‘There is no failure except in no longer trying.’ Then it suddenly made sense to me. As long as I was alive, I wasn’t a failure, but if I allowed myself to die this way, that

was another story. So with my remaining strength, I called for help and started a new life.”

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Ellsworth Kalas asserts that the very essence of being in an educational setting, including in the church, is to hand down valuable sources of inspiration, classic lines of wisdom as seen in such poetic pieces as Psalm 105. In encountering such pieces, it is like we are receiving beloved hand-me-downs which have proven the test of time. We experience hand-me-downs from friends and family that are worn with gratitude, joy and confidence. Many of us remember growing up and being handed our older brother or sister’s clothing which sometimes we weren’t very grateful about it. We were embarrassed and grumbled about being seen in public with such things but that didn’t change anybody’s minds, so we learned to make them our own. The irony is that now such hand-me-downs have become quite fashionable. Fashion seekers flock to consignment and thrift stores to snag those vintage styles like bell bottoms, ruffled skirts, plaids, and sweats. Embracing the value of those hand-me-downs can set a tone for embracing other things outside fashion that have been passed on to us. Schools have long valued the hand-me-down wisdom of such folks as Euclid in geometry or Pascal in mathematics or Shakespeare in literature – with these, you are talking about garments that have been around for a very long time, and with quality to die for. Then there are buildings that get passed on from generation to generation, such as the one you find yourself in now. Homes and churches, libraries and schools, art and science museums have been around before we arrived and will remain after we have gone. The practice of medicine is something that has been handed down and can be traced all the way back to the book of Leviticus. Medical advancements have progressed to the degree no one could have imagined 50 years ago but it’s

all built on gifts from the past. Any medical care you and I receive is an accumulation from centuries of benefactors. There is a wardrobe of blessings to be thankful for in this season.

As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week, the Psalmist invites us to dwell on God's wondrous works that have been handed down to us over the generations. There are many areas where improvement is needed in our intellectual, social, political, economic and spiritual wardrobe, but there should always be an emphasis upon God's marvelous works alive and blossoming in all those areas. This family to which you and I belong, this human race, is sometimes both an embarrassment and a pain in the you know what. But never forget what a wardrobe of good humanity has passed on to us. The biblical writers understood this and respected their heritage, learning to savor the beneficial while setting aside the destructive. They not only recognized it, they found strength in it. So it is that we have phrases from our text today like "God remembers God's covenant forever...which God made with Abraham, the solemn pledge God swore to Isaac. God set it up as binding law for Jacob, as an eternal covenant for Israel." Do you hear the handing down of God's promise from one generation to the next? The Psalms are full of the names and events of the past to remind people that they are the blessed beneficiaries of generations of faith, and of the unceasing goodness of God.

The Psalms hand down to us a practice of gratitude in all circumstances as First Thessalonians says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." The words "in all circumstances" shouldn't be confused with "for all circumstances" or thinned down to mean "in easy circumstances." Even in pain, we can find a place of gratitude, a place where alongside the agony of loss, we still count and appreciate what remains. In other words, you may lose your job, but you can still wear a spirit of gratitude because of what you have left. You may lose a

loved one, but you can still put on gratitude for what is left. But the cynic might protest, what if you keep losing more and more and more? Brian McLaren argues that it is still possible, because of what we have read, seen, and experienced, that even if we lose everything, we can still hold to our practiced habit of gratitude, of turning to God in Job-like agony and saying, “For this breath, thanks. For these tears, thanks. For this memory of something I used to enjoy but now have lost, thanks. For this ability to not simply rage over what has been taken from me, but to celebrate what was once given, thanks.” It is often a foreign language to our ears.

Yet, the Psalmist wants us to understand that gratitude inspires a life which is steeped in generosity and selflessness. Ann Landers once shared a story in her column about the difference between heaven and hell. God invites a seeker into a room where a group of people are sitting around a huge pot of stew. Everyone is famished, desperate, starving, and suspicious of their neighbor. No one is able to move from the spot they are seated. Each holds a spoon that reaches the pot in the middle of the room, but each spoon has a handle so much longer than their own arm that it cannot be used to get the stew into their mouths. The suffering and agony is terrible. God then invites the seeker, “Come, now I will show you heaven.” They enter another room identical to the first – the pot of stew, the group of people affixed in spots around the pot, and the same long-handled spoons. But there everyone is happy and well-nourished. “I don’t understand,” says the seeker. “Why are they happy here when they were miserable in the other room and everything is the same?” God smiled, “Ah, it is simple. Here they have learned to feed each other. Here they wear a spirit of gratitude.”

Jesus explains it so elegantly in Matthew 6: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like

one of these.” Yesterday, I was mesmerized by the fall leaves blowing in the wind like hundreds of colorful jazz hands waving their praise to God against the bright blue sky. God sends such beauty with reckless generosity. Look at Mt. Shasta and Lassen and understand that they contain more strength and grander than we can ever take in. Our hearts beat something like a hundred thousand times a day, we don’t give it a thought unless for some reason they skip a beat or some staircase accelerates their action. We rub shampoo into our scalp and take for granted that miraculous computer imbedded within our brains that performs so many various functions we will never plumb a fraction of its potential. What did we do to deserve all this beauty, power, and wonder? Not a thing. They were handed down to us at birth, and like the grace of God, are made new every morning. Why be embarrassed to be dressed in such hand-me-downs especially since everyone else on the planet gets their wardrobe from the same shop? Instead, let’s simply say thanks, thanks to history, to friends and family, to books and culture, and most of all, to God. Thank you for getting us all decked out in these magnificent, incomparable hand-me-downs! Amen.