

Can You Spare it?

Matthew 21:14-16

K Karpen, Sunday, August 20, 2006

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We once had a dog named Rusty who came with a dog-trainer named Pat. This dog-trainer had a tremendous, almost limitless, amount of respect and patience....for dogs. The owners of the dogs were a trial for Pat. We were timid. We were hesitant. We were slow. We were not firm enough with our dogs. "Your dogs are great," Pat would say. "I am here to train you."

Almost all of our shortcomings could have been forgiven, I think. We had our limits. We weren't dogs... We were only human.

Almost all of our myriad of sins could have been forgiven, I think, except for the big problem: We were way, way too stingy with praise.

"Look at your dogs!" They are working so hard for you. They are trying so hard to please you....breaking their hearts, for you, and all you can come up with is.....good dog."

"Can you spare it? I mean, can you spare it?"

I recently ran into Pat again. She's still around. She's still working with dogs...and their owners. She's mellowed a bit, I think; except for that one big important point: It still troubles her deeply that people are so slow to praise.

Praise is hard. Praise is hard. It is hard to give and hard to accept. It is hard to say and hard to receive. I'm a very appreciative person. I notice a lot of things people do, and I appreciate them quietly; to myself.

I appreciate things! I appreciate people. I admire you! All of you! But, I am not big on praise.

I noticed that one day last month when I was riding my bike along the Connecticut River in New Hampshire. I rode past a very beautiful garden set up beside a house along the bank of the river. The flowers were a shocking and delightful array of colors. A woman was out tending the flowers and I thought as I glanced over, "It must take an incredible amount of work to make a garden bloom like that," and I rode by.

As I rode along, I thought to myself, "Why didn't you say something? Would it have killed you? All that work to make something so striking, so glorious, you think she'd have been shocked that you noticed?"

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I rode along. I am shy. I didn't want to disturb her. I didn't want to embarrass her. I just left her alone. That garden is its own reward.

But, on the way back, I couldn't help it. The words were out before I thought about saying anything.

"That's an incredible garden!"

She looked up. Disturbed. Interrupted. She said, "Thank you," in a quiet voice and went back to her flowers right away. "Oh, you embarrassed her, "I said aloud to myself. "And now you're talking to yourself..."

But, you know, later on that day maybe it struck her to be praised for her gorgeous garden. Praise is a hard thing to hear, sometimes. And it is a difficult thing to give.

An evangelical friend invited me once to a "concept of praise" that she was helping to put together at Columbia. I was glad to go! But once there I felt a little out of place. I didn't know many of the songs we were singing and my hands really don't go much above my shoulders.

And afterward my friend said to me, "Don't you liberal Christians believe in giving God praise?"

I was so indignant! I was furious! I just said, "...no...not so much."

Sure progressive Christianity sometimes speaks in a different language than conservative forms of Christianity. But for all of us, when speaking of God and when speaking to God, our language needs to be the language of praise. I sometimes kid evangelical colleagues that it seems like they are unable to pray without that crucial word "just".

"Lord, I just want to say that we just come here today to just praise you and just lift your name in praise. (See, I can speak Evangelical when I need to.)

But they have a lot to teach me, they have a lot to teach the rest of us, when it comes to the core language of praise.

It shouldn't be like that! We share the tradition of praise! What would the psalms be like without praise!

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"Kol haneshana te hallel yah." Let everything that breathes, praise God. Let every breath I take, praise God. I love Psalm 139 where it says, "I praise you, for I am wonderfully made." According to scripture, the very reason we exist is to give God praise!"

And this is not only in scripture. Look at the rich, awesome hymn tradition in the Methodist movement.

Charles Wesley writes,

" O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer's praise." "I'll praise my redeemer while I have breath and when my eyes are closed in death, praise will employ my nobler powers."

If Wesley were around today, I think he might say to me, "Why are you singing that for? What do you want with a thousand tongues? You're not using the one you've got! Can you spare it?"

But does God need our praise? What does God do with our praise? I once got into a discussion with the wonderful Old Testament scholar Harrell Beck, who was also a great preacher. We were discussing the Psalms and someone asked, "What is up with God and praise? Does God have an ego? Doesn't God know he's great? Why do we have to praise God?"

Dr. Beck said two things: First, he said, "Thank God there is a being in the universe who is able to accept praise." Second, he said, "We do it for us, not for God." "Oh," we said. "Now we get it."

You know the bumper sticker, "prayer changes things"? We need another one, "Praise changes things." Praise does change things and mostly it changes us."

You can't give praise and be stingy, as a dog trainer I know could tell you. You can't give praise and be ungrateful.

It's hard to give praise and stay caught up in yourself. It's hard to give praise and feel sorry for yourself. It's hard to give praise and stay depressed.

I don't mean to suggest that praise is some sort of panacea for anything that goes wrong in your life. We are facing real challenges and problems, and, I am sorry to say,

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that they don't flee at the sound of praise. I only want to suggest this, if scripture tells us that you and I are made for praise, then praise need to become a bigger part of our lives. And, I believe that through praise there comes a moment when we say, I praise you! I praise you. For I am wonderfully made! For I am wonderfully made! Let my every breath praise my God.