

*“Who Can Withhold? Break Forth!”*

*“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.”* That Scripture from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah was intended to encourage the descendants of the Jews, who had been carried off by the conquering Babylonians to live in exile, as they set off to go back to Jerusalem and Judea after Cyrus the Great – God’s messiah had conquered the Babylonian Empire. So also, that message of joy and peace applies to when our Divine Parent’s Messiah acts on behalf of all of God’s Children. Indeed, the Psalms and other Scriptures declare the joy of all of Creation for the Reconciliation and Shalom – Peace and Fulfillment God does through the Messiah.

The children and the video helped us get a sense of the infectiousness of joy and of living praise during our moment for the children – the “Come with Joy and Dancing” part of our Worship Celebration. The question of why we should “break forth” with praise was addressed by the Text we used with the Children, Psalm 98. Let’s take a moment to examine parts of it a little closer. The first part of verse 1 addressed why we need to praise God saying, *“Sing to the Lord a new song because He has done wonderful things!”* We will consider some of those “wonderful things” shortly but first, let’s recall how the psalm suggested we can’t withhold our adoration of our Divine Parent but, instead, we need to break forth in our praise. **In verses 4-7 the psalmist sang, “Shout triumphantly to the Lord, all the earth! Be happy! Rejoice out loud! Sing your praises! Sing your praises to the Lord with the lyre — with the lyre and the sound of music. With trumpets and a horn blast, shout triumphantly before the Lord, the King! Let the sea and everything in it roar; the world and all its inhabitants too.”** Yes, both Creation and “all its inhabitants” are to break forth with praise of God!

Now, let’s consider some of the specific reasons for praising our Divine Parent. It has been reported how Jackie Robinson was “the first black man to play Major League baseball. In his first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson faced venom nearly everywhere he traveled. Pitchers threw fastballs at his head. Runners spiked him on the bases, brutal epithets were written on cards and spoken from the opposing dugouts. Even the home crowds in Brooklyn saw him as an object of reproach. During one game in Boston, the taunts and racial slurs seemed to reach a peak. To make matters worse Robinson committed an error and stood at second base humiliated while the fans hurled insults at him. Another Dodger, a Southern white man by the name Pee Wee Reese, called timeout. He walked from his position at shortstop toward Robinson at second base, and with the crowds looking on, he put his arm around Robinson’s shoulder. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career.” (As reported by Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com) Obviously, Pee Wee Reese must have somehow been moved to follow Jesus’ example of putting himself on the line for the welfare of someone different from himself – of working for justice.

Indeed, the Psalm 98 went on to say in **verse 8, “Let all the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the Lord because He is coming to establish justice on the earth! He will establish justice in the world rightly; He will establish justice among all people fairly.”**

Please note, the psalmist did not testify to God establishing justice among only certain people. This brings us to another reason for breaking forth in praise and breaking forth in our actions. Unfortunately, from earliest times, human beings have practiced prejudice, discrimination, and rejection of persons, who are not just like themselves. This has been expressed in broad terms, such as racism, but also, in self-serving pious terms, such as saying “only those who worship and act like me are worthy of God’s Love and Acceptance.” Certainly, our Divine Parent is not happy when we mistreat someone, which is why God wants everyone to seek and live justice. However, human – even religious laws, which make someone a sinner, when he or she is not harming someone else is an example of claiming God’s support of our self-serving demands on and rejection of others.

Our Scripture Reading from Acts confronts such prejudice and attempts to denigrate and control others. It was a remarkable experience! Peter, the eldest of Jesus’ original disciples, had been indoctrinated in the legalistic prejudices and mores of the Jewish Society. Yes, he had been heavily exposed to a different way by the teachings and actions of his Teacher, Jesus, but he was intimidated by the cultural pressures, which demanded he practice the rejection of those, who were not Jews and those, who did not follow all of the Jewish Laws. Peter needed an intervention, as did the early Christian Community, so they would follow Jesus’ example of forgiving, agape loving, inviting, and welcoming all people into the New Life in Christ and New Relationship with God. **Keeping that in mind, let’s look again at verses 44-45 of our Scripture from Acts, “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who were listening to his message. The Jewish believers who had come from Joppa with Peter were amazed that God had poured out His Gift of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles also.”** Let’s take note of two important aspects of those two verses. First, God’s Gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles – indicating the Divine Parent’s Forgiveness, Agape Love,

Welcome, and Acceptance of the non-Jewish believers of Jesus Christ. Second, just as we were talking about earlier, it was a shock to the Jews, who were present, that God did give the gift of the Holy Spirit to non-Jews!

The Jews were, evidently, extremely upset by this turn of events. Even though they heard the Gentiles “praising God’s Greatness” as the Spirit enabled them, they did not immediately recognize the implications. **Then, in verses 47-48, “Peter spoke up: ‘These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone, then, stop them from being baptized with water?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”** Then, at least Peter started on the path to recognize God Loves all people and Extravagantly Invites and Welcomes everyone into the New Life in Christ and the New Relationship with our Divine Parent and one another! He still had to periodically battle other Jewish Christians over the issue of giving up their prejudices against persons different from themselves.

Unfortunately, a multitude of persons, who consider themselves to be Christians, have still not come to terms with the revelation Peter received in our Reading from Acts. They have not broken forth from the self-serving judgmentalism, which seeks to limit the Christian Church and Faith to only certain people. It is crucial that we not only break forth in our praise of God for all that our Divine Parent has done for us but for us to also break forth out of our self-serving prejudices and ways, if we are to truly benefit from our New Life in Christ and New Relationship with God and all people. This requires constant awareness of how we treat one another and other people. It also requires us to put this new path into action in our daily lives.

William Willimon tells a story out of his experience to which many can relate. He explained, “On my way out of the church late one afternoon, I was chagrined to see, coming towards the church down the walkway, a rather forlorn looking man with a small bag, obviously a wanderer, a vagabond, a drifter, obviously coming toward the church seeking a handout.” Willimon explained, “This is what you get for having a church situated near a busy highway. These drifters drift through about twice a week, seeking a tank of gas for their trip, a meal, a gift – preferably in cash – for their journey to who knows where. They always have some sad story of woe to tell but the end is always the same – can you spare about \$25.00 in cash.”

Willimon confessed, “I sighed as I watched the man approach. It had been a long day. I had a meeting to return for that night and I was anxious to get home. I would meet him at the door, head him off, give him the only cash I had – a mere \$15.00 as I recall – and then send him, and me, on our way.”

Willimon continued, “‘What can I do for you?’ I asked with some annoyance in my voice.”

“‘I wondered if you might be able to help a fella’ on the way South,’ he said. ‘I was headed down to ....’”

“‘Yes, yes,’ I said. ‘Well, I’m in a bit of a rush. So here is all I have. A five and a ten. That’s all I’ve got.’”

“‘The man took the money as I offered it. Looked at it. And without a word, he turned, and headed out toward the street. Then he stopped, and turned toward me as I locked the church door. ‘I guess you think I’m supposed to thank you, to be grateful,’ he said with a surprising tone of defiance. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘now that you mention it, a little gratitude wouldn’t hurt.’”

“‘Well, I’m not going to thank you. You want to know why?’ he sneered.”

“‘Why?’ I asked.”

“‘Because you are a Christian. You don’t help me because you want to. You have to help me because He [now thrusting his finger up into the air, pointing to God] told you to help me!’ And then he left.”

Willimon concluded, “I stood there, stunned, angry. The nerve of these people! On my drive home it finally hit me. He was right.” (As told by William Willimon)

Let’s let today remind each of us to not withhold our praise of God and to also break forth in our following and living Jesus’ example of forgiving, loving, inviting, and welcoming all people! Amen.