

In a land in which a deranged man shoots at national leaders, supposedly because he disagrees with them, in a world in which a deeply troubled and, obviously, angry man kills three of his co-workers and then himself, in a world in which terrorist attacks are so frequent that many of us seem numbed to their impact anymore, in a nation in which governing looks more like chaos than order, nothing is more radical or counter-cultural than to live with joy, gladness, praise, and gratitude.

Praise Psalms, like Psalm 100, the one we sang this morning, frequently appear to me to be naïve invocations to happiness. They often don't seem to mention life's problems. You wonder how realistic the writers of these Psalms are. Are their worlds perfect? Did they not know terror? Angry people? War? Hunger? Sickness?

Well, sometimes these songs were written during the good times. Some of them probably appeared during the early part of Solomon's reign when Israel was rich and life seemed to be good. But the writers of praise Psalms were no starry-eyed, rose-colored-glasses folks. Frankly, they were probably better acquainted with the horror of life than we will ever be. But they trusted that something larger than the pain was true—something that led them to joy, singing, praise, gratitude.

Psalm 100 probably was an entrance song, the kind of song you sang when you entered the temple. Listen to these imperatives: "Come into God's presence with singing; enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." Begin worship, enter the sacred set-aside holy place with gladness, with a sense that what is ultimately true about life is not what people who gun people down believe and do. What is most true about life is not what those who want to instill fear, hatred, and desire for revenge believe or do. There is something much larger than those pieces of data. Something grander. Something more beautiful. Something more profound.

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

We live in light of a bigger identity. We live in light of a deeper truth. The practitioners of violence want us to think that who we are is so insignificant our lives are worth very little. They want to collapse who we are into categories like this: people who think like us or people who don't think like us. They want our identity to be something that is not given, but achieved through power or control. Sometimes out of their own inadequacies and sometimes out of their narcissistic belief that they are better than others, they want us to think that who we are is shaped by those who think they run the show. But they are wrong.

We are God's people. It is he who made us. Together we are his—his people, the sheep of his flock. Our identity comes from God. Our identity is given. We have status. Our lives are of inestimable worth. And our identity is not wrapped up in the categories of us and them. “Us and them” is what those of us who think our identity is a matter of *our* achievement believe. For that kind of “us,” we have to prove ourselves as being *right* or being a part of the *right* people or the *right* club in order for us to have status.

We are God's people, the Psalm says. We are not the creator of ourselves. It is God who made us. Now the Psalm in saying that is talking about God's creation of the people, the nation known as Israel. The invitation is to sing, praise, and be grateful because the singers are a part of a community that has a special relationship with God. But I think we, when singing “it is he who made us,” can also be saying that we all are dependent upon something greater for our very existence. All of us are a creation of God. We aren't self-made people. Wow, then! It is a gift to be alive—a gift that we don't give ourselves.

To know this is to know a truth that will lead us to gratefulness, thanksgiving, and joy. When life is all about me, what I create, what I do, how I defend and define myself, what I think, what group I'm a part

of, then I will find that there is much too much work to be done to be joyful. Today's Psalmist knows a different truth than this life-zapping one. "We are God's people. It is he who made us," the Psalm writer says, which is why we can sing, make a joyful noise, express thanksgiving, even in a world that is sometimes downright mean and ugly. We know a truth more beautiful, grand, and wondrous than all the miserable bullets that have flown through the air this past week.

In many ways, I think that is what Jesus is getting at in our gospel lesson when he tells the sent ones, the twelve apostles, that their job is to proclaim the good news that the "kingdom of heaven has drawn near." Their job, by the way, is not to tell people that they need to accept Jesus Christ as the personal Lord and Savior, or they will go to hell. Their job is to announce that God's ways are coming and that they've arrived. All the so-called facts may suggest otherwise. All the flying bullets may cause you to think that God's ways are way far off. But no! They are here. In Jesus, the one who went about teaching in their synagogues, curing every disease and every sickness, God's ways are appearing.

How Jesus reacts to the crowds, the masses, the peasants, the ordinary folks shows us what God's ways look like. When he saw the crowds, we are told, he had *compassion* for them. Literally, the Greek says, he was moved in his guts for them. He had compassion for them for they were "harassed and helpless." Again, literally the text says, they were skinned or mangled, living in the condition of being thrown down. These were oppressed people. And Jesus, moved in his guts, had compassion for them. The ways of God look like the compassion of Jesus.

And that compassion needs to be embodied, needs a group of folks who will live out compassion. And so Jesus sends out the twelve. Elsewhere he sends out 70. The number is not important. Frankly, twelve serves as a reminder of the 12 tribes of Israel. What matters is not the number but that the ways of God, which sometimes are hidden by flying bullets, be lived out, in the case of today's reading, in the local

community, but as last week's gospel reading--also from Matthew-- indicates, eventually to the ends of the earth. And that's where we come in. We are part of the way that the truth "we are God's people, the flock of the Lord," is spoken and lived out. We are part of the way that the truth "the kingdom has come near" is spoken and lived out in a world in which people are harassed and helpless, a world in which joy, thanksgiving, gratitude, and singing seem like naïve responses to the way life is.

But they are not naïve responses. Counter-cultural or radical as they may be, they are responses that trust a different and deeper truth. The folks who shoot at people, the folks who want to tear people down, who need to attack people because they don't agree with them, the folks who want to instill fear in people, the folks who think that life is about intimidation, power, violence, control—these folks don't know the deepest truth. These folks operate on the surface level truth that seems to rule in almost every time, generation and culture.

But there is a deeper truth that puts all of that shallow truth into perspective. It's the truth of the kingdom, the truth of the compassion of God, the truth that tears down all of the barriers, the truth that liberates us from fear, the truth that puts us in our rightful place and yet amazes us with our status. It's the truth that "we are God's people, the flock of the Lord." (sung) This truth frees us to:

make a joyful noise to the Lord, worship the Lord
with gladness; come into his presence with singing;
enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with
praise, blessing his name.