

Oct. 19, 2008 (24th Sunday after Pentecost)

“Celebration: Rejoicing in the Connection”

Text: Psalm 147; Acts 5:33-42

by the Rev. Bernard H. Lieving, Jr.

Let’s play a quick word association game. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say, ‘Celebration!’? (Congregation responds)

Yes, it is all of those things and more! Watch and listen now to some different examples of “celebration”. (Video) I make no apologies to Matt for TO’s dance in the end zone after scoring against the Eagles.

As Kool and the Gang sang, “there’s a party goin’ on right here
A celebration to last through the years
Everyone around the world, come on!”

Even though I don’t expect any of you to dance like James Browns’ parishioners, it is celebration time! Today we celebrate the connections – the remolding and reshaping of our lives during these six weeks of reCONNECTION. As Jim said in this week’s “Faith Matters,” “We’ll celebrate the way our prayers are connecting us with God’s power, the way our presence connects us with God’s people, the way our gifts connect us with God’s generosity and the way our service connects us with God’s transformation of this world. In short, we will celebrate the way our lives, through the life of this church, become more than we think we are!”

I participated in a celebration connection in June when Dorothy and I attended a reunion of the 1st Cavalry Division, the unit with which I served in Vietnam. I had not seen most of those men for forty years...the former nineteen and twenty-year-olds were fifty-nine and sixty...all of us older, grayer, thicker around the stomach.

We told stories, most of them true, and we laughed. We cried too for our friends whose names are on the Wall. We celebrated the intimacy that bound us together over those twelve months in combat and continues to bind us forty years later. That connection allowed one man attending his first reunion to talk with me like he said he had not talked with any one for forty years – his friends and co-workers never wanted to hear about Vietnam, his wife was afraid of his stories, and he did not want to burden his children.

As good an experience as that was, it lacked something – it lacked the God ingredient. Even though my faith was such an integral part of my experience there, it was not his. We did not share the common bond of being together as people of faith; there was no talk of how God gave us the strength to make it through that year.

Today’s Psalm commands the people of Israel to celebrate their God connection.

Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. ²The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the

outcasts of Israel. ³He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. ⁴He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. ⁵Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. ⁶The LORD lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. ⁷Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre. ⁸He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. ⁹He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. ¹⁰His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; ¹¹but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. ¹²Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!

¹³For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. ¹⁴He grants peace* within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat. ¹⁵He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. ¹⁶He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. ¹⁷He hurls down hail like crumbs — who can stand before his cold? ¹⁸He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow. ¹⁹He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. ²⁰He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances. Praise the LORD!

The psalmist's description of this God worthy of praise is a God so great, so powerful that he set the stars in place and named them; this is God who brought Israel home from the exile and builds Jerusalem; he makes the rain that nourishes the earth; he provides food for all creation; he controls the coming of the freeze and its thawing; and he provides for the security and well-being of his people.

At the same time his power was abundant; his understanding could not be measured. Did you hear too of God's concern, God's compassion for the weak and underprivileged? God healed broken hearts and bandaged wounds; God relieved the oppressed, the socially, economically, and politically helpless; God stooped to care for the nameless, those known only by the conditions that plagued them.

The psalmist uses language in such a way that his description of God's deeds makes the deed become a symbol for a way of knowing God and a guide to God's character; he makes it possible to know what to expect from God. So, just as Israel praised God for what God had done and was doing in her history, so today we, the church can praise the Lord who not only founded the church but restores, reconnects, and redeems it through God's power and compassion.

Today we celebrate being connected with God's power through the prayers we have dared to pray over these past six weeks. If your reCONNECT group was anything like mine, each week we ended with prayer requests. Think for a moment of the many requests you heard and prayed for believing that the power of God just might be unleashed through your prayers. We celebrate today that each of us has already or will commit to pray for this church and one another in the year ahead.

We celebrate how our presence connects us with one another. Whether here or in small group, worship is our response to God's seeking us. Frederick Buechner says that to

worship God is to serve God. “One way to do that is to do what God needs to have done – run errands for God, carry messages for God, fight on God’s side, feed God’s lambs. The other way is to do things that you need to do – sing songs for God, create beautiful things for God, give things up for God, tell God what’s on your mind and your heart; in general rejoice in God and make a fool of yourself for God the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.”

We celebrate the way our gifts connect us to God’s generosity. I think it was last week that Jim said he enjoys preaching about money. I have to be honest, I don’t. It was not an easy transition from Army chapel pulpits to this one. In the Army, the chapels are built by monies appropriated from the Army budget; utilities are part and parcel of the commander’s budget; and the chaplain’s salary is paid by congressional authorization. In the Army our greatest concern was finding ministries to which chapel offerings could be given as benevolent gifts.

The one constant, however, in both cases is the fact that financial giving ought to come from a thankful heart and out of love for the Lord. If we give to avoid guilt, or to seek God’s favor or out of habit or only if we like the preacher, God’s generosity is not honored. The place to begin with all our stewardship is accepting we cannot be a giver until we are a receiver. John 3:16 reminds us that the first gift we receive from God is God’s only Son to be our Savior and Lord. From there we celebrate being in partnership with God to rightly use all the gifts God gives us.

A couple weeks ago Jim referenced “Kudzu” and the Reverend Will B. Done. I dug around in my files and found one strip in which the good reverend is speaking to a church member when he says, “Remember Brother Tadsworth – the Lord loveth a cheerful giver.” To which the good brother responds, “Oh all right! I don’t like it, but here’s a check for your dad gummed building fund!” As he hands the check to the Reverend who has a huge toothy smile, Brother Tadsworth says, “Now get off my back!” The last panel shows the reverend walking away eyeing the check and saying, “Of course, a grumpy giver is nothing to sneeze at!”

We celebrate the way our service connects us with God’s transformation of the world. That really is what our prayers, presence, gifts, and service are all about – that lives might be changed, that God would be given praise and honor for the difference being made in the lives of common, ordinary people in this church and in the community. This morning we celebrate transformed lives... lives of people you know for whom the God revealed in Jesus Christ has made a difference. You are invited to a celebration! Be prayerful, thanking God that we are the church and privileged to participate in what God is doing in the world as you watch people affirm their “before” and “after” lives. We celebrate too as we respond with our prayers, presence, gifts, and service. If you have your commitment card with you this morning you may place it in the offering plate or you may bring it to the communion rail and offer it to God with a prayer of thanks.