

Living for Each Other
Psalm 103:1-13 and Romans 14:7-12
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
September 17, 2017 (after Hurricane Irma)
Rev. Glen Bell

Do you know the prayer shawl knitters at our church? They are a mighty group of women. They meet regularly to knit shawls that our care team, Kelly, Steven, Cheryl, Floyd, I and all our deacons provide to church members.

These women pray as they knit. They pray for each person who receives each shawl. They themselves have knitted and prayed through great personal tragedy, through significant personal illness and loss.

They knit because they know the Lord. They knit because the Lord is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. They knit because they want all of us to be wrapped in God's love.

A friend of mine served as pastor of a congregation with a similar ministry. He visited a woman in the congregation named Kat. He arrived at the hospital just before her scheduled surgery, to find her "in her hospital gown with a blue prayer shawl wrapped around her shoulders." They prayed together. "When the nurse came to take her to surgery, she took the prayer shawl off, kissed it and handed it to the nurse. She said, 'This is my prayer shawl. My church is praying for me. I am going to be just fine.'"

We come today to give thanks. We give thanks we are alive.

We give thanks after the anxiety and terror of Hurricane Irma. We give thanks that God is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. We give thanks for God's compassion. We give thanks that God lifts us up from the pit.

That's what it felt like in for me through the storm on that terrible night: a pit. Dark, with all the hurricane shutters, unable to see. Afraid, through the howl of the wailing wind, hoping the roof would hold.

We did not know what would happen. We did not know.

After the storm, after the cleanup and recovery started, a group gathered here on Tuesday evening. That's a part of our hurricane protocol, getting together as quickly as we can, because we need to tell our stories together. One of us talked about anxiety, about evacuating at 3:30 in the morning the night before. One of us talked about the tree that just barely missed the house, about the water that came through the windows. One of us talked about our widowed neighbor, about fear and uncertainty. One of us shared this: The storm made him remember who and what is truly valuable.

So you and I come today to give thanks. We bless the Lord with all that is within us, because the Lord is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love.

There is a mystery here, however. We were spared, but what about Barbuda, the Virgin Islands, the Florida Keys? What about those killed or devastated when we were not?

There is mystery here. Mark Douglas teaches at Columbia Seminary. He points out that Psalm 103 is a love song. Through it we sing of God's "forgiving, healing, redeeming, crowning, satisfying and renewing." We reduce the good news, however, if we refuse to sing, if we only measure God's love as a formula for *me*, if we shout, "Save *us*, God! Deliver *us*! That's your purpose, God! That's what you are for!"

No, as Mark Douglas reminds us, this psalm is a song, *a community* song. Singing is a creative activity, together. Through it we pursue beauty. Through this song, "we become aware

of ourselves before God. . . . Love and justice do not so much *compete* with each other,” we do not so much compete with each other,” as *complete* each other.” Put another way, God’s love “is active and mysterious and beautiful, and the song seeks to mirror that mysterious beauty.”

You and I become more than we are when we trust, together, in the midst of the storm. You and I become more than we are when we sing and knit and testify, caught up in this great song. You and I become more than we are when we give ourselves away, give ourselves over to love and justice.

How might we touch this mystery?

One of my friends is currently in treatment for a terrible cancer. He shares that his prayer life has changed big time. “Instead of prayers of petition (for myself),” he writes, “I thank God for already knowing my needs and being with me in them. I no longer give God a to-do list, since God knows better than I what our needs are. I am confident that God is actively loving us all, in the shape of our particular needs. I believe heartily in prayer, but on the other hand, the way prayer works remains a mystery to me.”

This is where love and justice meet, when you and I pray for ourselves *and* others with equal urgency, when we hope for others in their illnesses no less than we hope for our *own* cancer treatment, when we ask protection from the storm for *our* loved ones no more than for the people of the Caribbean, or the Keys, or Immokalee or Wimauma.

This love and this justice meet in Romans 14. “We do not live to ourselves. We do not die to ourselves.” Instead, our lives are caught up in the life of Christ and the lives of our neighbors. God’s love and justice never allow us to ask only for me, never permit us to reject and write off others.

We do not live for ourselves. We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. It is that profound, that mysterious, that simple, that beautiful. As we sing a song of God’s love, we discover that we can only do it with other voices, blending, merging, inseparable.

I see this blending and merging in the session of our church. Last Wednesday at noon, only a little more than forty-eight hours after Irma, your elders put aside their families and their work to gather here. They talked and prayed together. They focused not on their own wants and needs, but on love and justice. They planned a special offering this morning. They heard about our most challenged neighbors, farmworkers and their families in Immokalee and Wimauma. They planned ways to help our neighbors right here in Sarasota.

They are not living for themselves. They are reaching for the place where love meets justice.

I see this mystery and beauty in the staff of our preschool and church. Our preschool director, Clare, and preschool teachers, only three days after the storm, reopened the preschool. This provided the children a normal routine, free from anxiety, enabling parents to focus on so many concerns. Kelly, our associate pastor, and other dedicated adults, provided a day camp for the older siblings of our preschool students (and other children in our church) to surround them with love and comfort and reassurance.

They are not living for themselves. They are living the mystery of love intertwined with justice.

I see this wonder and goodness in all our church staff, in Kelly and Steven and Cheryl and Clare and Mary, for Rachel and Pam and Lisa. They worked early and late, sometimes at great cost, sometimes putting aside their own desires and needs, providing refuge for others, encouragement for others, care for others.

They are not living for themselves. They are living for that joyful mystery of God and neighbor and self all together.

This commitment to love and justice, this awe at the mystery of God's goodness for us *and* our neighbors has two big implications for our lives.

First, please check out your green bulletin insert today. If you are able, please make an over-and-above financial gift. It will empower us to help our hurting neighbors in the name of Jesus. If you are able, please gather the items for Beth-El and Mision Peniel and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. We will get them to Immokalee and Wimauma. Beth-El also welcomes any of us who can drive to Wimauma to help with their feeding program.

Second, September and October are stewardship season in the life of our church. I know: stewardship, at first glance, is *not* attractive. But think about it. The only way our preschool could respond so quickly is because of your ongoing commitment to house and support them. The only way Cheryl and Kelly and Steven could reach out to so many people is that they are already on staff and ready to go. The only way we could be a refuge for people to charge their phones and to rest in the air conditioning is because of your ongoing and generous gifts.

God's love is active and mysterious and beautiful. You and I become more than we are as we give ourselves away.

This, exactly, is the foundation of stewardship. Stewardship isn't rooted in money. Stewardship begins when we are caught up in God's tender care, the One who is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love.

God's compassion becomes our compassion for others. God's generosity becomes our generosity. God's great love for us becomes our love for others. This is the place where love and justice meet.

I keep thinking about Kat, awaiting surgery with the prayer shawl wrapped around her. Do you remember? Just before the operation, she handed it to the nurse and said, "This is my prayer shawl. My church is praying for me. I am going to be just fine."

You and I can say the same thing. The Lord is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. From that mystery where love and justice meet, we are freed to love our neighbors, freed to give with generosity.

No matter what happens, we are going to be just fine.