

## Pride Sunday – Psalm 82 (18Aug19)

I'm glad that this Psalm happened to show up today.

Let me set the stage for that:

A lectionary is a set of readings. This Psalm appointed for this day is listed in a set of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. It's a three-year cycle with some origin in the ecumenical movement of the 1960's, eventually giving rise to this version in 1994. It is used in lots of mainline Protestant churches, like some Lutheran and UCC, plus Episcopalian and Presbyterian, a few United Methodists and more. It's also fairly close to the Catholic lectionary. So lots of us might be hearing a specific Bible reading on a certain day.

As we are amid a Psummer of Psalms, and as we prepared to celebrate Pride Sunday as the MCC, I was eager to discover what the Revised Common Lectionary had assigned for today. Would the passage fit? Would it be able to relate in any way? After all, if we randomly open the Bible and point at a page, we're likely to end up without much spiritual insight. It could be an instruction about an ox or a verse about Egyptians or telling of destruction. Or lots of general praise for God's goodness. So what would make us expect a coincidence of some Psalm having something to say on Pride Sunday?

This question is important because the most frequent way the church has looked for the Bible to say something about or to people who are LGBTQ has been to go through this big mixed book and pick out seven little verses that probably aren't even talking about the same thing we are and then to begin issuing condemnations. We could just as well find lots in the Gospels where Jesus is close friends with other men, he even kisses them, and refers to Lazarus as the one whom he loved. We might as well claim gay Jesus as definitive instead of the condemnation passages. It would have at least as much to say to our current context. And there's plenty where Jesus redefines gender roles and stereotypes and sees that divide as more fluid than fixed, and we

could say he was an early proponent sympathetic to transgender issues.

Partly, then, a lectionary restricts me from picking and choosing to reinforce my view, skewing a message from God. Given today's random Psalm, not chosen particularly for Pride Sunday, not cherry-picked as pro or con, it's an interesting opportunity to ask what a broader overall biblical message might be.

With that question in mind, I was surprised and delighted that Psalm 82 really does seem to speak to today. To start, this Psalm declares God as a God of justice. That's the criterion, and failing to do justice is judged as ungodly, as not-right. God doesn't want us on the side of evil, and the good side is declared by God as being "fair to the poor and to orphans," working to establish life for "the helpless and everyone in need" and offering deliverance to "the weak and homeless."

For an easy point of contrast, the acting director of the federal department of Citizenship and Immigration Services rather notoriously decreed this week that the poem on the Statue of Liberty needed an adjustment, that it should say "Give me your tired, your poor...who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge."

But God's voice in the Psalm will not make such distinctions. It doesn't tell to rescue the weak and homeless, orphaned unaccompanied minor as long as they have proper documentation and can prove their asylum case and jump through legal loopholes. It doesn't say to help the helpless as long as they look like you and talk like you and share your religion. It restricts no timespan on assistance. It doesn't ask one in need to prove their worth; it's a given.

Our current national wrongdoing and injustice becomes still more apparent, since the last verse of the Psalm is directed as God's judgment on the nations. God has explicitly judged that as misbehavior, as miscarriage of responsibility: those with authority have not done what they were called to do.

Another note on authority in this Psalm: Following much of the ancient world, this Psalm

talks about a divine council, or literally a congregation of heavenly beings. As we think “waitasecond! the Bible is monotheistic!” other gods showing up probably throws us off. Some interpreters say these heavenly beings are more like angels. Others see it with a common early belief that each nation had a god. In this Psalm, the God of Hebrews stands at the center of their gathering with the most moral authority, pointing out that others had failed in their duty.

If you don’t like to picture our God like Zeus with a Greek pantheon, aren’t sure about a heavenly courtroom, and don’t like this notion of other gods or whatever, still you can picture any unseen forces that are beyond our control, ruling over us. There’s often something invisible to wondering where wickedness comes from.

And it’s always helpful to remember that a god is wherever we most put our trust. We continue to have other gods exerting their authority in our lives because we give allegiance to money or to laws, to national identity or in-groups, to popular culture and healthiness and to our own selves, claiming our own abilities and desires as the highest authority.

But in any of those cases, when it has called astray from defending the poor and assisting the vulnerable and working to establish a system that is on their side, when we fall captive to self-interests or to dominant ideologies, when the powerful get their way while the hurting are abandoned, this Psalm declares God’s strong judgment against it, warning that the very foundations of the earth are at risk and God’s intention for creation is threatened with collapse. But God declares judgment that those false gods will fall. Whatever immortality they had, whatever seemed to be godlike power will die. In one of the terms of our time, God essentially says there’s no such thing as “too big to fail.” This is a strong call to justice.

With that, I want to return to the emphasis that this Psalm was assigned for this calendar date. Not quite the randomness of flipping to any page, but this is what the Bible happens to be saying to us today, the voice of God being spoken, and

asking to be applied into our lives, our context, including for Pride Sunday.

I would also pause to highlight that this is a more primary voice of scripture and of God than if we went on the hunt for seven little snippets reinforcing someone’s homophobia. To imagine that that perspective speaks for God or is what the Bible has to say in relation to LGBTQ lives is a gross warping of this more prevalent message that calls for justice and says God sides with the oppressed and vulnerable.

To be clear, that is part of why as a congregation we join our voices to God’s voice on this Sunday. It’s why I—as a straight, white, American-born, cisgender male—offer my presence, knowing still much too often, people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in whatever way are threatened in our nation, facing injustices of losing jobs and housing, maybe risk life itself, living with unequal treatment, unfair opportunity, unkind interactions, and unjust pressures. If we follow our God, if we recognize God as the central moral authority and the judge, who created and holds the fate of the world, then we are called to stand on the side of justice, against persecutions, and together with these siblings, to be part of the work of “delivering them from the powerful hands of heartless people.” That is the life our God intends for all of us to be living together. Anything less won’t suffice. We’re clearly not there yet. There’s work to do.

But there’s another part of this Pride Sunday that doesn’t directly fit into the Psalm, that I want to keep inviting us into. That is celebration. The Hebrews reading reminds us we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, that many of our ancestors in this faithful journey continue to encourage us, to lead us to persevere, as we follow Jesus the pioneer. In this long view, we’ll get there together. They aren’t left out, and neither will we be. We’ve come this far by faith, and our weary feet will come to the place for which our parents sighed (ELW 841).

And so we, with good reason both in looking back and looking forward today, gather in

celebration. This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stonewall, which makes it also the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first pride events. In faithful memorial, we might mark as martyrs for the cause, sacrificing saints who gave us steps forward to guide us on in progress.

This year also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the MCC. And we celebrate that for half of that existence, our congregations have been officially welcoming, striving for justice, witnessing to the world, celebrating that the image of God is equally and uniquely in each of us, that none of us is removed from God's blessing, God's effort for life. Since 1995, we have been continuing to practice more and more how we can be authentically the people God created us to be and is calling us to be. In 1995 there were only five open and affirming UCC congregations in the state. In 1995, Advent preceded any other congregations in this synod by a decade in becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We have been and continue to be witnesses to God's goodness, in our lives and for the sake of the world. This is to be celebrated, and we can be proud. We join in living with pride.

**Psalm 82**      *Contemporary English Version*

When all of the other gods have come together,  
the Lord God judges them and says:

<sup>2</sup>“How long will you keep judging unfairly and  
defending evil people?”

<sup>3</sup>Be fair to the poor and to orphans.  
Make it right for the helpless and everyone in need.

<sup>4</sup>Rescue the weak and homeless,  
deliver them from the powerful hands of heartless  
people.

<sup>5</sup>“None of you know or understand a thing.  
You live in darkness, while the foundations of the  
earth tremble.

<sup>6</sup>I, the Most High God, say that all of you are gods  
and also my own children, all of you.

<sup>7</sup>But you will die, just like mortals, including powerful  
rulers.”

<sup>8</sup>Do something, God! Judge the nations of the earth;  
they belong to you.