

Psalm 111

Praise for God's Wonderful Works

¹Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

²Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

³Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it^[a] have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

Ephesians 1

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful^[a] in Christ Jesus:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ^[b] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,^[c] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this^[d] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Lord of All, Head of the Church

Psalm 111; Ephesians 1:1-14

August 19, 2018

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Though I haven't always made this a consistent practice, on Ordination Sundays, I like for the message that I preach to go deeper into one of the questions we ask of those being ordained as elders to serve on the Session of the church. The very first question asked of those about to be ordained or installed is this: *Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* It makes sense to me that the first question is a Jesus question with a Trinitarian spin on it. That we ask our officers to make a claim about who Jesus is – for them personally and in relationship to both the world and the church tells me a lot about the kind of Christians we aspire to be. That we also ask these same church leaders to identify that knowing Jesus leads them to believe in one God – expressed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to ask them to speak a bold “YES” to a theological question about who we claim God to be.

I'll get more to the specifics of this particular question in just a minute, but I do want to say that the Ordination Questions are one of the best pieces of writing that the Presbyterian Church USA has to offer. Really, I mean it. They begin with this densely loaded question about who Jesus is, and how Jesus points us toward God. They brilliantly follow up by asking about scripture both as a sacred authority and as a personal Word. Of course, since it is designed for the leaders of the church to answer, we ask about governance and obedience, and about the kind of constitutional authorities under which will we place ourselves. We ask for a heartfelt commitment to being a friend among one's colleagues in ministry. We ask our elders to be

concerned about being kind and neighborly. We ask them to be agents of reconciliation in the world. We ask them to be preservers of the peace, unity, and purity of the church. We ask them to use their God-given gifts, and we expect them to work hard at showing the love and justice of Jesus Christ in their own lives. It is a huge commitment, and yet these are really the fundamentals, as I see them, of seeking to follow Jesus Christ in one's life – whether you happen to have been asked to serve on Session or not.

I also use these questions as the basis for conducting the required “examination” of those about to be ordained to an office of the church. I do so because, even though this morning you will hear them as basic yes or no questions, to ask of each question, “What does it mean to you?” inspires amazing conversations. These are faith-based statements to make, and the meaning behind the “I do” or “I will” is not unlike the “I do” of a wedding vow. Saying “I do” take this person to be my spouse doesn't mean that it's a simple thing or that it doesn't need refreshment and renewal from time to time. These faith statements are best seen as a moving, growing, evolving way of expressing one's promise to serve God whom we know intimately through the amazing life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Which gets me back to square one, with question one. *Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him as Lord of All, and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?*

What I absolutely love about this question is that it goes so much further than the typically sought answers to get one's stamp of approval as a Christian. It is no regular litmus test question. It's not a who's in and who's out question with respect to affirming some doctrine about Jesus' divinity as God's only begotten Son, nor is it merely about Jesus' ability to save us as terribly misguided sinners. The first three words tell us so. It doesn't ask, “Do you believe?” It

asks, “Do you trust?” Do you TRUST? Trust implies far more than belief. It implies relationship. Do you trust Jesus? That’s a bold question. In order for me to trust Jesus, it means I have to know a few things about Jesus. I need to be guided by his teaching. I need to be willing to imitate his compassion. I need to let go of my fear of his ability to anger the powerful and dismiss false piety. I need to know what causes Jesus delight and what makes him weep. Then, I need to allow Jesus access to my life, in all its pain and in all its glory in order to trust in him to actually be my Savior. That means I am totally exposed and vulnerable, and yet this vulnerability is what allows me to be trusting and grateful for Jesus’ love. It’s not saying, “I’m a bad person, but Jesus loves me anyway.” It’s saying I’m a mixture of good and bad, of both gifts and shortcomings, and Jesus loves the real me completely.

The question though, doesn’t stop there. Besides being my Savior, I acknowledge two more things to be true about Jesus. First, that Jesus is Lord of All. What does that mean? This takes me back to what John’s gospel claims about the preexistence of Christ before the world was even formed. There’s something cosmic, everlasting, enduring about the living Christ. There isn’t a time when Christ was not, and there won’t be a time when Christ ceases to exist. This is the claim that in Jesus, a holiness dwells that is God fully within him, and God, in and through Christ is the Lord of All, of all creation, of all people, of all love and all imagination. There is not one thing untouched by the love and power of Jesus Christ – even if there are those who dismiss it or deny it. The one true God, we would say “in Christ” is Lord of All.

The other claim we make about Jesus Christ is that he is the Head of the Church. This is more specifically about those who claim the title “Christian.” For those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ and form themselves into communities of Christians that we call the church, there is no authority greater than Jesus Christ and his teachings. He is the brain behind

the operation. That doesn't mean that all decisions have been pre-made for us, but it does absolutely fit that bracelet wearing campaign that asked WWJD – “What would Jesus do?” It is the deep reminder that we are not only to believe in Jesus but that we are to pattern our lives and shape our communities around his view of the world. It's what makes it sometimes absolutely amazing and other times incredibly sad that we have so many expressions of what it means to be a Christian. To have multiple ways of being the church I think can be an authentic expression of who Jesus came into this world to be. However, we do sometimes have to decide between what makes “good religion” and what makes “bad religion” come into being. This statement makes the claim that good religion, in the Christian world, would put Jesus first, and that you would recognize the wisdom and teachings of Jesus in how it is being practiced. When that ceases to happen – for instance – when money or power becomes the head of the church, rather than Jesus, something is ultimately going wrong.

These two claims add so much to our understanding of Jesus Christ beyond the role of “personal Savior.” The soaring hymn to Jesus that begins the book of Ephesians has some of the poetic language in it that undergirds the claims made in this vow. We were being chosen in Christ BEFORE the foundation of the world. Then Paul claims this: *With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* Jesus Christ is Lord of All. And the claim is also made by Paul, that we are children receiving this inheritance of grace. Whole communities will be blessed, as he gathers these churches, with the understanding that Jesus Christ is the Head of this Church. The text for this morning concluding with these words: *In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal*

of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Then the final portion of this multi-part question is this. Through Jesus Christ, do you believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This is the belief part of the question and it is an affirmation, pure and simple of the doctrine of the Trinity – one God, in three persons. It is an affirmation of mystery. We don't know exactly how this works. It is an affirmation of monotheism. We believe in only one God – not a multitude of Gods. We believe that the expression of God is made clearly known in the person of Jesus Christ, and also in the presence of the Holy Spirit – but that it doesn't divide God up into parts to be known in this way. As you can see, this understanding is a faith affirmation – a “Yes” to something we can only barely scratch the surface of understanding most days, and yet, we pray to live and grow into this knowledge to help us understand the Triune God even better.

Like I said, I love these questions. They are deep and meaningful. When we probe them fully, there are lifetimes of discussions to be had within them. I'm not sure exactly when each one was finalized and adopted, but I took these exact same vows almost 26 years ago when I was ordained. They've been hanging around a long time, and the few times I've seen efforts to change the wording, it was met with resistance, wise resistance – every single time. So, take your copy home. Put it somewhere you are likely to see it, and if you have ever been ordained to an office of the church, elder or deacon, remember your vows. If you have not served in that capacity, that's fine too. You will get just as much out of these questions by pondering them as those who have been responsible for attending church meetings. I find that to be true because they are questions mostly about the Christian life in general – except for the few minor bits about how to fulfill your office and being willing to serve on governing bodies of the church. If you

aren't an officer now, or haven't been – you can pray for those who serve our church now or for your pastor to continue to grow in the vows that she made way back when. Living up to all of these is a steep challenge on some days.