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Say It With Psalms
6. November 9

Psalm 19 CEB

Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork...

The Lord's Instruction is perfect, reviving one's very being.

The Lord's laws are faithful, making naive people wise.

The Lord's regulations are right, gladdening the heart.

The Lord's commands are pure, giving light to the eyes...

The Lord's judgments are true...

No doubt about it: your servant is enlightened by them; there is great reward in keeping them.

But can anyone know what they've accidentally done wrong?

Clear me of any unknown sin and save your servant from willful sins.

Don't let them rule me. Then I'll be completely blameless;

I'll be innocent of great wrongdoing.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart
be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

I suspect that anyone who has spent any time in church has heard the closing words of Psalm 19 more than once: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer," as the Common English Bible has it. Or perhaps more familiarly, we may know these words in a slightly different translation: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." They are words that C.S. Lewis called "the greatest poem in the [Psalms] and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." The Apostle Paul quotes Psalm 19 in his letter to the Romans. Haydn, Bach, and Beethoven all have set the words to music,¹ and the closing words continue to inspire artist from contemporary Christian solo artists to a German reggae group (I

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_19

had no idea Germans were into reggae).

I suspect that if you recall regularly hearing these words they were from the mouth of the preacher at the beginning of his or her sermon. But here's the thing: these words are not just for preachers. They're not just for musicians. They're not just for famous Christian writers or Apostles. No, they were first uttered by an anonymous poet 3000 years ago as a request of God by someone who wanted his or her words and actions to be worthy of the best God called him or her to be and not the worst.

And that is a good ambition for any of us, not just preachers and musicians, on this day: May **our** words, **our** actions, **our** thoughts be ones that are acceptable and pleasing to a God of grace and love unbounded and unconditional. You see, my friends, I have to tell you: I am worried; I am scared, even. I am *worried* that we as God's people have found ourselves increasingly incapable or – worse! – *unwilling* to submit our thoughts and our actions to the standard the Psalmist offers us as we have moved through this election season. I am *worried* that come the day after the election on November 9 we may find that we don't know how to return to words and actions that we want to be pleasing to God and instead all we will know how to do is offer and applaud the worst of personal attacks and slurs. I am *worried* that the bonds of affection, love, care and grace that have united us as the people of God may be so strained that they will no longer hold us together as one body in Christ.

Some of this I lay at the feet of Facebook and Twitter and the like. If you're not familiar with Twitter, you may not know that every Tweet, as they're called, is limited to 160 characters. So? Well, you can't even order at the McDonalds' drive-through in 160 characters. It's just impossible to have a sustained, thoughtful, nuanced discussion of

ideas when the whole point is to make things as short and pointed as possible. Lincoln and Douglas had seven debates, each lasting three hours, and the transcript of their debates runs to 400 pages. Those years were perhaps the most tragically contentious in American history but can you imagine the actors in that drama Tweeting about their difference? Thankfully, no! The Twitter phenomenon, I believe, has touched us all, whether or not you know a tweet from a twerp, and has inevitably if subtly pushed all of us into more pointed, less nuanced, and often more attack-oriented language. *And I cannot imagine that God finds that pleasing.*

The Facebook phenomenon is even more pronounced and has more affected our lives. Worldwide, there are almost two **billion** Facebook users. Over half of those folks log on daily, and worldwide every day almost five **billion** Facebook posts are made. In the United States, 20% of all daily website visits are to Facebook.² But it's not just Facebook's enormous *reach* that has led to a terrible trend in our culture, it's something else: First, Facebook has redefined the notion of what a "friend" is in a way that is simply shallow and at odds with the Christian life. What do I mean? Well, my wife Barbara and I both noticed something – we both have been "unfriended" (as Facebook calls it) by certain folks who had previous "liked" us because our posts were in the eyes of some too liberal and the eyes of others too conservative. Yet, if that was all that this was about it would be little different than third graders debating about who likes whom. But things are much more insidious than that. What happens is this: More and more, your "friends" become only those people who approve of what you post.

²<https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

Which means that more and more your views go unchallenged; more and more you are inhabiting an echo chamber where only variations of your own voice are ever heard. More and more, walls are built up between people, more and more people compete to have the most inflammatory post that their circle of “friends” can “like” and the cycle spirals and continues and worsens. *And I cannot imagine that God finds that pleasing.*

And the Facebook phenomenon seeps over into our lives in other ways too. More and more we may only listen to Fox News or MSNBC; more and more we only pay attention to Ann Coulter or Keith Olbermann – and more and more we define who are our “friends” by whether we approve of their politics. And with all of that comes, again, less and less nuance, less and less of an ability to see that most people and most issues are painted in complex shades of gray and that no candidate is a saint or a devil. But I want to challenge you: I know that in my life – and I hope it is true in yours – the best friends that you have known are those who don’t simply serve as your personal echo chamber, who love you enough to say when they believe you are wrong, who care enough about you to try hard to understand you and do you the honor of taking you seriously – which means never just accepting what you have to say as gospel just because you said it. Do you have a friend like that? The Facebook phenomenon is making it harder and harder for that to happen. *And I cannot imagine that God finds that pleasing.*

There’s another troubling thing about the “Face-book-ization” of our shared life together. I call it “binary thinking.” When someone posts something on Facebook you are invited to react to it – to either “like” or “dislike” it. But where is the button that you can push that says “I find part of what your saying to be true and helpful, but part of it

seems misleading to me”? Or the button that says “You make a good point but I think that you have misstated a certain position.” Do you hear what I’m saying? Being either a responsible citizen or Christian demands of us that we be encouraged and able to think about complex things in complex ways. Because life is just not as simple as ANY of the candidates say that it is and it is certainly not as simple as simply “liking” or “disliking” a position or an idea. Those very concepts are just much too puny to truly encourage us, as St. Paul once said, to “test the spirits” with the best of our hearts and our minds. The more this kind of thinking has dominated the airwaves, the internet, and the media, the more you and I, again, get subtly but insidiously captured by it – and the more our real-life relations and our ability to think hard and complexly about difficult and complex things will suffer. *And I cannot imagine that God finds that pleasing.*

And all of this leads to a final problem that has me worried and scared for our shared life together. The echo chamber where we only listen to our own views and the effect of over-simple binary thinking that doesn’t do justice to complexity also subtly but inevitably has led to something that would make Jesus weep: we too often no longer listen to one another in order to understand each other, but simply in order to attack and even destroy another person. As Justice Clarence Thomas puts it (not someone I often find myself quoting), “We have decided that rather than confront the disagreements and the differences of opinion, we’ll simply annihilate the person who disagrees with us.”³ Or as Gary Peluso-Verdend, President of Phillips Theological Seminary, puts it, “We have fallen into the trap of turning opponents into enemies and

³http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/us/politics/justice-clarence-thomas-25-years-on-supreme-court.html?smid=tw-share&_r=1

failed to look for [God's] image in the faces [even] of persons whose moral stances we deplore."⁴ *And I cannot imagine that God finds that pleasing.*

Where does that all leave us in the face of November 9, in the face of having to come together to continue to be the Body of Christ together? Well, here's the thing: We Disciples have known since our founding one-hundred and eighty-five years ago two things: that, yes, our faith absolutely ought to inform our voting, but, secondly, there WILL be times when mature, sincere, thoughtful Christians will disagree on how that ought to happen. Yes, your and my claim to follow a Lord who was born of an unwed mother, whose family had to flee for their lives as political refugees from terror, whose understanding of God led Him to a death as the victim of unjustly-used governmental power mean that our faith **absolutely** ought to affect what we think about family planning and immigration and refugee issues and what the limits of governmental reach should be and what the role of governmental power should be - and which candidate we should vote for. If your faith or mine doesn't prod us to think about these things - and not just echo the nasty, mean, shrill, over-simple sound-bites all around us **then it is a faith that too cheap and it is too easy.**

But: we **WILL** disagree on the specifics. We will disagree on whom to vote for who will best carry out our beliefs and convictions about all these things and so much more. But the question that we have today and will have come Wednesday morning is this: *Will this season in our nation's life so have damaged us that we cannot come together around the Table of our Lord to celebrate his mercy to us together?* You may

⁴<http://ptstulsa.edu/ConfessiononElectionDay>

recall Jesus' response when he was once confronted with a loaded question about whether it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. He asked for a coin and then posed His own question: *Whose image is on this coin?* But you know what? With that question Jesus is actually asking us: *Whose image is on YOU? That* is the deepest question Jesus was asking those so long ago, and it is the question He addresses to us each and every day: *Whose image is on YOU.* When all is said and done in this season of our electoral lives, I hope that the answer will continue to be that it is the image of God through Jesus Christ who is stamped on your soul and mine. ***I don't want*** to bear the image of hateful anger to certain folks. ***I don't want*** the image that is on me to be forever tarnished by a campaign that has too often invited glee and gloating – from all sides – at the heights of nastiness and meanness that are abounding around us. ***I don't want*** us to think only in over-simple ways about some of the most distressing and complex of issues. ***I don't want*** us to see those with whom we disagree – sometimes profoundly – become “enemies” to be annihilated. Come November 9, when we gather for worship on a Sunday morning I want first of all to see not political partisans but children of the living God who love one another, who contend *respectfully and thoughtfully and civilly* with one another, who never stoop to presuming the worst about one another but instead rise to the better angels of our nature, as Abraham Lincoln put it, and who are thankful for each of those candidates who put themselves forward – whether they support them or not – to make this a better country, a better nation under God.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to

you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” One preacher has an intriguing take on these words; he says:

I wonder what it would be like to pray [this] prayer ... in other settings to focus us on the purpose of our existence? What if just before you begin to discipline your child you stopped and prayed: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” What if just before you entered a meeting at work you prayed: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” I know when I think about this,... there are times that what I say and what I do not seem to reflect this purpose and intent for my life. The words of my mouth and meditations of my heart are at times not even acceptable to the standards I set for myself let alone acceptable to what I believe would be acceptable to God.⁵

On November 9 – and every day! – will you join me in praying this prayer in those tough moments of our lives? Will you join me in trying to live **up** to what God hopes of us as a people instead of living **down** to the standards of a too-often hate-filled world? Will you join me, in Peluso-Verdend’s words in vowing to drink less “deeply from the well of anger, fear, and resentment” and more often “from the well of kindness, compassion, and love”?⁶

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to

⁵<http://revplockhart.blogspot.com/2012/09/3-reflections-on-psalm-19.html>

⁶<http://ptstulsa.edu/ConfessiononElectionDay>

you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” May it be so.