I need to confess... As we were saying earlier in the service about things we are grateful for—I gotta tell you, I am really grateful that I didn’t drop my manuscript on the way up to the podium! I always have this fear I will drop all my notes and then scramble trying to get them together.

Will you join me in prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight Lord, so that we would more perfectly love you and give you the thanks that you deserve. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

As many of you know my full time ministry position is as a hospice chaplain. I am out in the field; we have patients at numerous, many different facilities as a matter of fact. Many of the facilities I go to are assisted living senior homes. Something that I was not aware about until I started this ministry position was just how many of these facilities have animals. Mostly dogs, but some cats. And, let me tell you, these dogs are pampered! The nicer the facility too, the more pampered the dogs seem. One particularly nice place that I go to, the dogs seem to be the equivalent of pampered 18th century French aristocrats. I wouldn’t be surprised one day to come and see these “noble” dogs with powdered wigs and faces basking in their own decadence. And at this one facility (which will remain nameless, to protect the identity of these decadent creatures!) the dogs are particularly pampered. I lead the residents there in devotions. We sing hymns and pray and the dogs will often blissfully and lazily lie in the middle of the floor in the midst of singing. One resident there liked to think that the dog was enjoying the devotions. I think the dog was just claiming the whole room for his own. Who is the pet and who is the master here? In short, I didn’t think they know how well they have it made. Then I found out that these dogs had been rescued from a shelter. One can easily picture the stark contrast of their previous life to their now pampered existence. So then I realized that it’s not that they don’t know they have it made. I realized that they just take what they now have for granted (food, affection). And please don’t report me to PETA for my slanderous remarks on these dogs! I don’t hate animals, I am just making a point!

Once, while I was leading devotions at this place, and actually discussing this very point I was causally petting one of the dogs. The animal then nonchalantly and lazily rolled onto his back as if to say, “Ok I will permit you to pet me.” He takes what he received for granted. I found myself resentful at this mutt that doesn’t seem grateful for what he has. But the truth is… we do the same don’t we? We take the gracious gifts we have received for granted.

Before we dive further into the specifics of the Psalm I think it is important that we overview a few points and go over some background.. I think we need to overview what how the Psalm was used. And also look at the background and overview of it. This Psalm was used in the temple in a context of worship. It is a historical Psalm. It discusses a shared history: a communal history. This Psalm is one of thanksgivings. It should be noted that thanksgiving in the biblical world was quite different than ours. For the Hebrews, thanksgiving was a public event as opposed to being a private event like it primarily is with us. For us if someone were to get up in front of a group of people and publically thank someone and go on and on about it—it would seem like grandstanding.

The word Chesed continually shows up in this Psalm cont. uses this word. We trimmed down the usage when we read it responsively today. Each half verse actually says it though. It’s hard to render chesed into English. Some different attempts to render it are: “lovingkindness” “steadfast love”
“faithfulness” and “mercy.” You got a flavor for it by our responsive reading. But it is really hard to do justice in translating this word into English.

*It is important to note that Chesed is relational.* It is like a husband/wife relationship or at least the way one is supposed to be. *Hosea 2:19* sheds some light on this. In this verse God states to his people Israel: “And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love (*chesed*), and in mercy.” (*Hos 2:19 NRS*). *Chesed* is the love and loyalty that is supposed to exist between a husband and wife. Imagine a marriage where one spouse doesn’t tell the other one they love them. Where they don’t take any action to invest in their relationship. That wouldn’t be a strong marriage. That wouldn’t involve *Chesed*.

*Chesed calls for reciprocity, for response* especially the way it is used in this Psalm. To shed some light on this from another scripture look at *Joshua 2:12*. Which states (and this is Rahab talking to the Hebrew spies): “Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness (*chesed*) to my family, because I have shown kindness (*chesed*) to you.” (*Jos 2:12 TNIV*) (*Jeremiah 31:3?*)

Because God has acted in *concrete, specific, tangible* ways, we should respond in concrete specific ways. This Psalm discusses many specific tangible *reasons and events* to give thanks. They seem to range from cosmic to the mundane. One Biblical commentator, Limburg notes, “The prayer ‘O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever’ is as appropriate from an individual over a plate of food as it was from a people who had just escaped slavery into freedom. In both cases, the prayers are expressions of thankful hearts, amazed that the God of heaven cares about this people or about this person.” (Limburg, 464). The issue of something so simple and what seems mundane, such as being thankful for clean water, should not be overlooked. In our society supposedly 100% of people have access to clean water. You may have heard about what our Church and denomination are doing with Covenant Kids Congo. There is a real need for clean water in the Congo. Only 40.5% of people have access to clean water in the Congo. We have so much to be grateful for. Both of what we think is the mundane, such as clean water and easy and ready access to food, and the supernatural and miraculous such as God covenanting with us through Jesus Christ.

This Psalm just doesn’t say “God is good.” It tells you *why* God is God. And why we should give thanks to him: “Give thanks to God because… Give thanks to God for…” There are so many reasons for us to give thanks to God. This Psalm discussed God’s *concrete* acts. It tells about God creating the heavens and earth in love. It talks about God delivering his people in the Exodus event, and it talks about him giving his people the promised land.

It should be noted that some of these acts may not look good at first glance. After all, killing first born and killing kings, whom some are named by name doesn’t seem to be login. *Chesed* is not a wishy washy sentimental love. Note, verses 17-18. This may seem very harsh, it names specific people. As another Biblical commentator notes, “To many people, this does not seem to be very loving, but the stark realism indicates that God’s love is not simply sentimental” (J. Clinton McCann Jr. *NIB,* 1225). God’s *chesed* is such that nothing will stand in its way.

We have spoken of the concrete *reasons* to give thanks. Which are the concrete specific ways that God has acted in salvation history. But *how* do we give thanks? We must respond with action that honors God. We must engage in action, action…and you guessed it, more action! Micah 6:8 puts it well and makes the connection between *chesed* and action well: “He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy (*chesed*) and to walk humbly with your God” (*Mic 6:8 TNIV*).

One important way that we can act in our response to God is through communal worship. I think it is very easy for us to neglect communal worship as being a response to the way that God has acted in
history. This Psalm is used in a context of worship and communal praise. It doesn’t just praise God for what he has done for *me* alone—in the singular. It praises God for what he has done for *us*—in the plural. And it’s done in a context of worship—a response of praise. Our worship and praise is always a response to what God has already done. It is our way to give thanks and honor God. How many people have you met who say that they don’t need to go to church to be a Christian? It is important to not neglect communal worship. This Psalm is proof of it. Staying at home on Sunday morning and watching church on TV is not a communal response. It is not communal worship. Communal worship is not an option. I realize of course that there are unfortunately homebound people who cannot come to church. But that is all the more reason why we bring church to them in their homes.

Of course the response of worship as thanksgiving is not only limited to Sunday worship. Romans 11:36-12:1 sheds light on this: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. NRS

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 11:36-1 NRSV). Offering ourselves to God is in response to his greatness and in response to what he has done for his people. It is a response to the way that God has acted concretely in history.

One powerful and personal way I have found to give thanks to God is that I wrote my own Psalm to God. I realize of course that writing one’s own Psalm is not inspired in the sense that scripture is. But it can be a very helpful and spiritual activity. At one point in my life, I was really having trouble seeing the way that God’s faithfulness was consistent and present in my life. Someone whom I talk to about my prayer life, and my life of faith and receive spiritual direction from, suggested I write a Psalm describing the way that God has acted in my life. I did so on a retreat. It was a powerful and moving experience. I had before me in black and white the way that God has acted concretely in my life. I read the Psalm from time to time and I have it to pass on to my children so that I can say, “Look at what the Lord has done for our family.” An important note that can’t be stressed enough is that we have a responsibility to tell others the ways that God has blessed us. I must confess that I have been guilty at times of asking for people to pray for a specific blessing for me, and then when it happens I neglect to share how God has blessed me. In telling out we don’t need to approach it as “look how much God has given me, I must be great.” Instead we could say, “Look what God has given me despite myself.” For the Hebrews, thanksgiving was public. You made it known publically the gifts given by the other.

As we have noted, this Psalm talks about specific ways that God has acted in history. Christianity not a philosophy or set of abstract ideals. It is not some set of timeless truths or some words of wisdom. So often people seem to miss this in our society. We write and devour countless books about how to become a better CEO through 3 easy steps through Biblical principles. We read books about various self help issues arising from biblical principles. These are not bad things, but they seem to be missing the real point of what the Bible is ultimately aiming at: the real point is that the Bible records God’s concrete action in history. This is aimed at drawing us into that relationship with Him through relationship with Jesus Christ. The Gospel writer John put it well: “…these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31 NRSV). It is about a relationship. A relationship with a real person. A relationship with someone who really existed. I relationship with someone who really acted in history. An “I-thou” relationship.

This Psalms tells some watershed events concerning God’s interaction with his people. It tells the story of those whom he has covenanted with. It says we should give thanks to God and that he is good. It gets into specifics:
That we should thank God because he made all creation in its wonderment. That we should thank God because he acted for his people on the Hebrews behalf, and lead them in their Exodus. That we should thank God because he gave his people a promised land.

… but this story doesn’t end there with this Psalm it continues into the New Testament:

We should thank God because the word was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. We should thank God because Jesus offered himself upon the cross. We should thank God because God raised Jesus from dead on Easter morning. We should thank God because the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost on the church.

…but the story doesn’t end there either does it:

We should thank God because he has acted in our lives. We should thank God for the way he provides our daily bread. We should thank God because he has called each and everyone us into a relationship with him and that is why we are here today…

We should thank God for the specific and tangible ways he has acted in our lives as the people of God. We should thank him for that which he has done for us in the person and work of Jesus. That which we have so much to be thankful for, demands a responsive. It does not demand just an attitude of gratitude; it demands action and concrete response.

Let us pray: Lord help us to respond appropriately in thanks to the grace you have given us. Lord we so often neglect to give you thanks. Help us to respond to the grace you give us. Help us to spread that grace to others. Help us to tell of your great deeds and bear witness to your name. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For further study:


http://www.bible-researcher.com/chesed.html. A website that reprints a discussion of the meaning of the word “chesed.” The research is a little dated, but still helpful and readable.