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**“Time Out – For Praise”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 17, 2010  
Jeremiah 31:27–34; Psalm 100; Luke 19:28–40**

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Let's talk about a form of behavior modification,  
familiar to many of us who are children,  
or who have children in our homes or classrooms: “time out”.

What kinds of things might cause you to land in time out?

A fight with your sibling? Refusing to eat your vegetables?

Mouthing off to your parents? Saying a bad word?

Taking something that doesn't belong to you?

Being rude to a friend?

Time out is usually time away from the action. Time for emotions to cool.

Time to think things through. Time to pray.

Time to formulate a more appropriate behavior

in order to be freed to return to play or to eat.

A young woman pastor tells the story of having the privilege one Sunday  
of sitting in the pew with her two young children, ages 6 and 9,  
as holy communion was being celebrated.

She says that as the bread was distributed, her children politely took a cube of bread,  
passed the plate down the pew,

and quietly ingested “the body of Christ, broken for you”.

And as the tray of communion cups was shared, likewise,

her youngest took one of the little cups without fingering any of the others,  
which was good;  
passed the tray to her sister without any spillage, which also was good;  
and then tilted the cup and drank "the new covenant  
sealed in my blood", and paused.

Her minister mother, bowed her head and closed her eyes in a brief prayer  
of relief and thanksgiving.

But upon opening her eyes, she discovered her youngest daughter  
with the entire communion cup in her mouth!

And she wondered to herself:

Am I, the minister, going to have to disrupt worship with a frantic call for help,  
if she begins to choke?

Should I whisk her out by the side aisle before we make a scene?

Does anyone here know the Heimlich maneuver?

Instead she looked at her daughter and hissed,

"Can you get that thing out of your mouth? Then do it NOW!"

It was more difficult than she thought, but the cup did eventually pop out,  
and she said to her daughter in a stage whisper,

"You will NOT be allowed to take communion again unless you can show me  
that you understand proper behavior.

Don't you ever put that entire cup in your mouth again.

I thought you were going to choke to death. You scared me."

(Judith Hockenberry. *Reformed Liturgy and Worship*. "The Children in Our Midst". p. 251)

This pastor/mother essentially banished her child to time out from communion,  
or into communion exile,

but she said that this incident gave her a deeper respect and sensitivity

for parents with children in the pews,

and the necessity of teaching children how to worship as they worship with us.

Nevertheless, have you read the latest statistics concerning the PC(USA)?

Some ratios come as no surprise:

Six out of ten worshipers are women;

Seven out of ten are married;

Six out of ten have college degrees;

Four out of five are members of the congregations, most others  
attend regularly;

Most report their pastor is a good fit for the congregation (whew!);

Large majorities claim they "always or usually" experience God's presence,  
joy, and inspiration during their congregation's worship service.

And, pay special attention to these last two:

**Only 34 percent of worshipers report children living at home -  
that's down from 38 percent in 2001;**

**And, the median age of PC(USA) worshipers is 61 -  
that's up from 58 in 2001.**

(Ida Smith-Williams. "Presbyterians are Older, Even More Involved In Their Communities".  
*PC(USA) Research Services*, October 4, 2010)

But look at what's sitting up here before us today:

an anomaly in the PC(USA);

members below 61 years of age;

and children, from families with children living in the home;

a gift beyond measure in today's church.

And I am prone to wonder,

does God send us these children for us to teach them how to praise,

or do they have something to teach us as well?

And if we were to praise God as they do,

might our congregation continue to grow younger?

I may be wrong about this, totally off base,

but it seems to me that congregations which spend more time in praise,

seem to attract a younger contingency.

So, I think it's appropriate for us, at this point,

to take time out, not to admonish our youngest members,  
but to praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
for the gift of children and young families in our midst.

Time out – for praise!

**Song of Praise:** “Halle, Halle, Halle”

“Time out” for ancient Israel is called “exile”.

Some have been abducted from their homes and hauled off to Assyria.

Others have been physically forced to travel a great distance  
and to live as refugees in the foreign culture of Babylonia.

The Temple, the center of their lives back home in Jerusalem,  
has been destroyed, and there is not anything they can do about it,  
except mourn, complain, and lament – which they do frequently.

They are homesick and homeless; fearful that Yahweh God has abandoned  
them for good.

And yet, into the uncertainty of their despair and doubt  
comes the Word of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah,  
piercing their darkness as light:

Words of good news that will sweeten the sour taste in their mouths;  
words of good news that will unclench their children's teeth;  
words of good news that will allow all of God's children, from the least to the greatest,  
to know that God is their God, and that all of them are God's people,  
regardless of circumstances that might indicate to the contrary.

Listen to the Word of the Lord that came to the Prophet Jeremiah:  
words of presence, promise, reassurance, and hope.

**(Read Jeremiah 31:27–34)**

Time out for ancient Israel, *has its limit*, God says. And time out is almost over.  
Just when it seems they might be grounded for life, exiled for eternity,

these words of the Lord cut the darkness like a light saber.

And certainly a response of thanksgiving might be appropriate  
to such exceptionally good news,  
for the gift of pending liberation.

After all God is about to cut a new covenant that enlarges the former Sinai covenant,  
making it unilaterally unconditional;

God is about to do a whole new thing, not only for the Jews,  
but that "all" might know God.

God is going to inscribe the rules on every person's heart,  
deeply imprinted inside their very being, so that they will never forget them.

But, and this is the very best part, the part that always gives me chills :

God is going to begin a new practice of divine amnesia with us,  
not only forgiving our sins, but also forgetting them,  
remembering them no more,  
so that life can go forward without the weight of past sin  
holding us hostage.

And certainly a response of thanksgiving from us might suffice in this situation.

But Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that  
a response of praise goes beyond even thanksgiving.

"Praise, is a part of healthy human personhood, " he says.

"To be human means to be willing and able to praise."

(Walter Brueggemann. *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 478)

While mourning, complaint, lament, and even thanksgiving are acts of self-assertion,  
notes Brueggemann, praise is a glad act of self-abandonment,  
a lyrical ceding of self to the holiness of God,  
an acknowledgment that in the end, well-being is essentially rooted

in something wholly Other, and not in ourselves. (Brueggemann. p. 476-478)

And so, ancient Israel takes time out to praise.

And the hymnbook of ancient Israel is sprinkled with praise.

Every 45 psalms or so, sandwiched between the individual laments,  
and the hymns of thanksgiving, and the psalms of corporate lament,

Israel takes time out to praise, not necessarily as a result of  
anything beneficial to Israel,  
but as a child might say, "just because".

And so we hear classic praise poetry break forth,

and we learn, with the whole people of God, that at any time, and in any place,  
"it is right to give our thanks and praise".

Let us take time out to praise, "just because", reciting Psalm 100 responsively.

### **Psalm 100**

Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands;  
serve the Lord with gladness  
and come before God's presence with a song.

**Know this: The Lord alone is god;  
we belong to the Lord, who made us,  
we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture.**

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving;  
go into the holy courts with praise;  
give thanks and call upon the name of the Lord.

**For good is the Lord,  
whose mercy is everlasting ;  
and whose faithfulness endures from age to age.**

**Song of Praise: "In the Presence of Your People"**

Or we could **not** be people of praise.

We could **not** praise our God, and we could **not** praise our children.

We could be a place where "**never** is heard an encouraging word".

After all, as theologian Marva Dawn tells it,

praise is "a royal waste of time" in today's utilitarian culture;

by engaging in it, we don't accomplish anything useful in our society's terms.

Recently, our church's Christian Education committee was meeting,

and we were reflecting on Promotion Sunday in August,  
and how things went that day,  
as we involved children in worship leadership.

I told them that if I ever want to measure the emotional temperature of worship,  
I tend to glance down at Sue Fricks  
to see how things are registering with her.

She's kind of like my barometer of how worship feels.

When worship is upbeat, she claps;

when it's not appropriate to clap, she wiggles her fingers in silent applause;  
she listens and nods approval; or she bows her head in prayer.

I love watching Sue's embodiment of heart-felt praise and prayer.

But on that Sunday after I made a point of telling the committee to keep an eye on Sue,  
when I looked down at her, I was heart-stricken.

She had her head back staring at the ceiling. Or she was lying down in the pew.

Or she had a pillow behind her neck, her eyes closed.

What's wrong with worship today, I wondered. Is it that flat?

Is there no atmosphere of joy and praise in our liturgy?

Little did I know, until later, that Sue was having a bad bout of vertigo that Sunday,  
and that the least movement or sound was sending her into a spin, literally.

But it would be terrible, I thought that day, if we just went about worship, business as usual,  
without praise, without gusto, without vigor, without courage and encouragement,  
without children and child-like joy.

We would be about as dull as a pile of rocks.

Praise and "worship is a royal waste of time, for it immerses us in the regal splendor  
of the King of the cosmos," Marva Dawn says.

It takes time out and (listen to this) it "takes us out of time  
and into the eternal purposes of God's kingdom," she notes,  
where we are changed,

because God will transform us in that time out.

"It is good for us," she says, "because it frees us

to enter into the poverty of Christ...

who chose to rescue the world by means of the way of humility...

Worship of such a God immerses us in such a way of life, empowered by a Spirit

who does not equip us by means of power or control,

accomplishment or success, but with the ability

and humility to waste time in love of the neighbor."

(Marva Dawn. *A Royal Waste of Time*. p. 2)

And so, it follows, as Marva Dawn suggests, that if we waste time royally to praise God,  
we likewise are bound to waste time in loving praise of neighbor.

Paul Tough, who documented Geoffrey Canada's wildly successful educational initiative  
for under-served children in New York called The Harlem Children's Zone,

talks about the place of vocabulary and praise in

the developmental life of a young child.

Under Geoffrey Canada's directive, researchers compared two groups of children ages 0-5:  
those raised by professional parents; to those raised by welfare parents.

By careful observation,

they discovered that children in professional homes

hear an average of 487 utterances each hour,

while in welfare homes, the children hear an average 178 utterances per hour.

By age three, the researches concluded,

welfare children would have heard 10 million words addressed to them, on average,

and professional children would have heard more than 30 million words.

More than that, they found, the kinds of words and statements that children hear  
is just as important to their development.

When comparing discouragements – negative words, prohibitions and disapprovals –  
to positive words of encouragement,

the research found that by the age of three,

the average child of professionals would hear about 500,000 encouragements

and 80,000 discouragements,

and the average welfare child would hear about 80,000 encouragements



and 200,000 discouragements.

Welfare children in Harlem, it seems, didn't hear much beyond the basic instructions and directions for living:

"be nice", "don't touch that", "sit still", "be quiet",

"keep your hands to yourself", expressed in negative language.

But the children of professional parents were exposed to millions of extra words on top of those basics,

and these words tended to be positive, varied and rich.

(Research by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, as documented by Paul Tough. *Whatever It Takes*. p. 41-43)

And guess which ones thrive? And guess which ones live longer?

And guess which ones have the greatest potential of

growing up to be brightest candles of God's hope for the world?

Do we want our praise of God to be only vertical,

or do we want it to have horizontal implications as well, for the very

least of these in our midst, the youngest, the oldest, the poorest,

the most disadvantaged?

Jesus says that even when the deck is stacked against us, we take time out to praise God and sing our loud hosannas with strong voices.

Pharisee-types are want to disagree. They tend toward rebuke,

saying disparaging words like:

"Cut that out." "Hush." "Keep quiet." "Put your arms down."

"It's not right to behave in that way here." "Time out."

Hear Jesus' response to their discouragements and decide how we might prefer to waste God's precious time.

**(Read Luke 19:28–40)**

Amen.