

I Would Have Gathered You!

Psalm 24, Matthew 23:23-39

November 5, 2000

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” With these strange words, Jesus describes not only his ministry to the city of Jerusalem, and not only God’s relationship to the people of Israel, but also God’s relationship to all the people of the world, especially you and me.

Why is it remembered today? So that we may hear his lament over us: “O *Richmond, Richmond*, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” These words are addressed to the holy city, and through it to the leaders and the citizens of all the people of God. “How often would I have gathered your children together!” “How often would I have gathered you together!” “How many times have I wanted to gather you together!” “How hard I have tried to gather you together!” This is a summary of his gospel. Even while he laments our recalcitrance, this is an open invitation for us to be his people.

This gathering has been at work throughout all time. First, Christ’s desire to gather us together was the will of God before creation! This desire is not an afterthought. It is not incidental to the great scheme of things. It is the key to the whole scheme and the driving force behind all that is. It is the desire not only of Jesus Christ, but also of his God and Father, to gather us together as his very own. This is not because we are so loveable, which we are not, but because the heart of God is love. This is not because we are so good, which we are not, but because God is so good.

Before God made us, before the creation of the world, before the beginning of time, God thought of us—all of us—by name! From all the infinite possibilities of what God could have done, God chose us to be his own, then he created the world as a place for this to happen.

Think what this means for our lives. We are rooted in eternity. We have our origin in the mind of God. We are here for a reason, and a good reason. No one can take this away from us. The foundation of the world is love, not hate or indifference. When we gather with God and with each other we are fulfilling the very purpose of life, not going down some dead end road. Some say that human life is nothing but a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. That is not true. It may seem like it some days! But it is not true. Some will say that we have no maker, that life emerged by chance and therefore has no meaning, direction, or purpose. That is not true, either. Some may feel that life is empty and has no joy. But remember where we started. Remember that God thought of us, that he made us as his very own people, and that he wants to gather us.

Second, God’s desire to gather us has to do with life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the part that we usually hear the most about. God sent Jesus to regather us together. What has happened here? God did not want a world full of robots! God wanted a world full of people, full of human beings with free will who wanted to love God in return, who wanted to be gathered together, who wanted to love each other.

You know the story. Given the choice, we have chosen to disobey rather than to obey, to turn away from God instead of toward God, to think more highly of ourselves than we do of God,

to think that we are at the center of the universe instead of God being the center. It is absurd. It would be laughable if it were not so serious. At least we know this— that God created us with a genuine freedom, which is to say that God genuinely desires our freely given love.

“How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” Once we turn away, it is like a deadly and incurable disease. Though we begin with free will, once we start down one path, others paths are no longer open. This is the reason God sent Jesus Christ. Our turning away from God is a terrible thing, but it did not catch God by surprise, and it certainly did not defeat God. God had a plan to win us back.

Jesus Christ came not only to gather a few disciples but particularly to die on the cross— the one and only innocent man in human history, dying the terrible death of a criminal— and then, having died, to be raised to new life.

This is, among other things, an attention grabber. This is our wake up call. Even though we cannot get our lives into the right focus once we put ourselves at the center, God draws our attention to Christ’s sacrificial death for our sake, and this puts our lives back into focus. Looking at Christ on the cross puts God back at the center of our lives, where he belongs, or rather, where our lives belong, centered around him.

This work of Christ is how God regathers us after we have scattered, run all over the place, and hidden from him as well as we could. Without violating our free will, God lifts us out of the mess we are in and makes it possible for us freely to return.

Third, God’s desire to gather us is the present reality of the church. We are gathered here today, with God and with each other, in at least partial fulfillment of God’s desire. We are not all here. Some members are away. But in some way, at some level, we are here in fulfillment of God’s long-standing desire to gather us together in Jesus Christ.

This is the place for us to plug into God’s plan for the world and for your life and in mine. The world is not constructed in such a way as for each of us to have a private relationship with God. The whole plan all along has been to gather us together. We all know that the church does not live up to everything it is supposed to be. But we do know that we try to be obedient to the will of God and we invite everyone else to journey with us.

Fourth, God’s desire to gather us extends into the future. We might call it heaven or the Kingdom of God. Eventually, God’s desire will be accomplished. Christ’s resurrection is promise of our own. Fellowship here is the beginning of what we will share there. We live now in hope, looking forward in confidence to that which is yet to come.

This is the good news—God in Jesus Christ desires to gather us together. How do we respond to this? How do we react? There are at least three ways indicated in our text. The first has to do with a willingness to be gathered. The criticism of Jerusalem had to do with its not being willing to be gathered. This was, and is still, remembered as warning the church. There it is always a temptation to turn away from Christ, to be unwilling to be gathered, to be unwilling to be his believing, worshiping, and serving church. Do we want to submit to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or do we still want to go our own way?

Second, we are to respond to God’s grace with integrity and genuineness of faith. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for tithing mint, dill, cummin. Tithing means giving ten percent to God. It is a biblical standard everywhere expected. But tithing tiny spices was cheap and showy.

Yes, they were supposed to tithe spices, and they were also supposed to tithe their harvest and their entire income! Jesus is not saying to neglect tithing. In fact, he is saying that we should

tithe and also that we should go on beyond that to the heart of the matter— to the relation to God and neighbor: justice, which is fair; mercy, which is more than fair; and faith, which has to do with both truthfulness and fidelity.

So again, we hear these two commandments: love and worship God, love and serve neighbor. This is the shape and pattern of the Christian life that is an appropriate response to the gospel.

By way of extension, there is a third implication of the gospel here. We who have been gathered together by Jesus Christ are, in turn, to gather others to Christ. Having heard the gospel, we are to live and proclaim it. Having received God's mercies, we are to pass them along. Having been beneficiaries of God's grace, we are to become agents of God's grace in the world. The campus of Virginia Commonwealth University is a mission field for us, right here at our front door. The neighborhood of the Fan District of Richmond is a mission field for us, for it is our neighborhood. The housing projects of the City of Richmond are mission fields for us. Indeed, the whole of the city and the surrounding counties are mission fields for us. Wherever we live, work, study, and play, there we can spread the good word, there we can live and articulate the Christian faith, there we can invite and bring people to church.

Last year, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received 11,000 adult members by profession of faith and baptism. That sounds like a lot, until we realize that the Presbyterian Church has two-and-a-half-million members. Are we gathering God's world into the church? It took two-hundred adult members of the Presbyterian Church, all working for the full year, to bring each single convert to the Christian faith and into the Presbyterian Church! We are not doing very well in terms of spreading the gospel and gathering the world. I think we can do better. I think we can do better as a denomination, but to do so, it has to start in the local congregation. It has to start right here.

“O *Grace Covenant, Grace Covenant*, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” Are we ready and willing for Christ to gather us together to himself?

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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