

MY PEOPLE

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, July 17, 2016

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was an American writer and innovator of jazz poetry, best known for his work during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Here is an example of his work, called “I, Too, Sing America.”

*I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.*

*They send me to eat in the kitchen
when company comes,
But I laugh, and eat well, and grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table when company comes.
Nobody'll dare say to me, “Eat in the kitchen,” then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.
— Langston Hughes*

As you can tell, he identified deeply with the heart cry of oppressed and marginalized black Americans, “Let my people go!” He popularized the phrase “my people” in a poem of the same title.

*The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.*

*The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.*

*Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.
— Langston Hughes*

We share a common human need to identify ourselves and connect with others of similar passion and purpose—first, our family members and those they associate with, then our community and our nation—where people speak our language, like similar foods and activities.

Some rural communities are quite homogenous, while others, especially urban, are diverse, even multiethnic. But the broader the boundary the less meaningful the phrase, “my people.” In fact, if we speak of the whole human race in such a way, we distinguish ourselves only from non-humans, like animals or plants, and the phrase loses its impact.

This leads me to say, that acknowledging distinctions like “my people” does not necessitate or generate segregation or prejudice. I may appreciate “my people” without denigrating or despising others.

But I must also say, that prejudice and distrust are native to our fallen human nature (the sin that lives in us all), so that, apart from the grace of God, we will inevitably put others down in order to feel “lifted up.” May God truly lift us from such an impoverished view of the world He has made.

God’s People

Remarkably, God Himself uses the phrase, “my people” to refer to those who have chosen to trust and follow Him. Who could imagine that the Creator would so identify with His creation? That He would reach to us, even come to us, with such a desire for fellowship?!?

Yet it was He who gave Himself the name Immanuel, which means God-with-us. He is the God who is “with us”! He is with His people. I am overwhelmed by His love!

There is a responsibility that goes with the title, “my people.” There is an expectation. There is an accountability. It is so in your family. It is so in your culture. It is so in your nationality. And it is so with your faith.

To be “His people,” to be “Jesus’ people” brings with it certain expectations (whether they are proper or not). When you identify yourself as a Christian, other people may expect certain things from you. They may expect you to be generous. They may expect you to be kind. They may expect you to be honest. They may expect you to be compassionate.

It’s not that others cannot or should not demonstrate the same qualities, but the insistence that you do so will be greater, because you represent Jesus Christ.

For this very reason, many Christians shy away from revealing or declaring their faith. Life is easier in obscurity. People may be more accepting if they don’t know about your allegiance to Christ.

But you have not been sworn to secrecy; you have been sworn to authenticity, to openly demonstrating your faith in Jesus, so that others may follow in your steps.

The God who is unashamed to identify with the likes of you, expects you to be unashamedly His. If you will, repeat these four lines with me:

“I am God’s people.”

“I am Christ’s people.”

“I am called by His name.”

“I will live for His sake.”

(Now give one another a high-five for having the courage to say it out loud.)

God loves His people! Hear me. God has love for everyone, and everyone may become one of His people. But God and His people have something special, something extraordinary, together.

And just as God expects certain things from His people, He also pledges certain things to His people. And *both* are expressed in His words to Solomon, the son of David:

“(When disaster strikes and times become difficult and disheartening,) if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from Heaven, and will forgive their sins and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

What an astonishing promise!

God Himself acknowledges that in spite of His watchful involvement in human affairs, disasters may come. Even His people are not exempt from all trials. But for His people, there is hope in the midst of trials!

This is not a generic promise made to all humankind. This is a promise specific to His people. Specific to you!

When trouble comes, God promises to be with you, ready to help you. The God of the universe, our Maker, has made a promise *to you!* He will be your Immanuel! He will be *with* you! He will be *for* you!

He asks only *two things* from you (just two!):

- Humble yourself and pray
- Seek His face by turning from your own selfish ways

That’s all He asks of us, so that He may release His powerful grace.

Pray

We may pray without humbling ourselves, but we cannot humble ourselves before God without praying. If you are serious about practicing humility, you must practice praying. You must begin talking to God about everything and in every situation.

If you are happy, take the time to thank Him for His grace and provision.

If you feel lonely, invite His presence and begin to entertain Him with your speech as you would a favored guest.

If you are frustrated or in pain, ask Him to help you—to heal you and give you peace.

If you leave God out of the equation, you're actually just trusting in what you can endure or what other people can do for you. This is selfish and wicked. God's people don't avoid Him. They don't isolate themselves from Him.

God's people draw near to Him.

And if you are serious about praying, you must pray humbly. This does not suggest that you put yourself down before God, or think less of yourself. Rather, that you think of yourself less, and think of God more.

What does God want from you? What does He want to do for you? What does He want to do through you? Think about these things. How could you effectively say, "Not my will, but Your will be done"?

And when you have asked God for His help, right there and then, even before you see or feel any change, begin to thank God for hearing you and for caring about you. If you're going to humble yourself in prayer, then you must exalt God in prayer.

Seek My Face

The second thing God asks, if His promise is to be released, is that we seek His face by turning from our wicked ways. This is more practical than intentional. We may express our good intentions in prayer, but this is about what we do *after* we say, "Amen." This is about how we *carry out* our good intentions and our promises.

Seeking the face of God is a metaphor for pleasing Him, which is something we do by our *behavior*, especially by our interactions with other people.

Samuel, God's prophet, asked, *"What is more pleasing to the Lord: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams."* (1 Samuel 15:22)

Obedience is a word despised in our day, for it implies—and rightly so—that someone *else* has the right to tell us how to behave. Can you see, then, how obedience is tied to humility.

We expect it from others, but do we offer it ourselves to our God and Savior? Do we pray humbly and seek God obediently?

What God Will Do

If we do these two things—if we pray well and frequently, and live in a manner that pleases God—then He will do *two things* in return:

- He will hear from Heaven, and
- He will forgive our sins and heal our land.

Heaven may seem far off and distant, but it is not out of God's earshot. He will hear you.

Though your circumstances may be far from heavenly, and even the result of your own choices, God will hear your prayers. God listens to you! When you pray humbly and seek His face obediently.

And the most wondrous part of this is: His hearing you is not based on your past performance, but on this present moment. If your past has been less than exemplary, but today you genuinely choose to turn around, your voice will reach Heaven's throne.

Those sins—those failures, those selfish choices, your disobedience—may all be forgiven, if you turn to Him. And as wonderful as forgiveness is, that's only the beginning! He will forgive you and heal your land. That's the landscape of your life—your relationships and responsibilities—the soil of your fruitfulness.

It may take time, but He will restore the fertility of your land. He will make it fruitful again.

As you return to your daily life with a newfound commitment to seek the Lord by your obedience, God will work with you and through you to rebuild your relationships and restore your wealth.

This is His answer to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

What Will You Do?

Considering the tumultuous condition of our world today, and examining your life in the light of these words, what choice will you make?

Will you turn a deaf ear and walk away? Or will you humble yourself and turn to God?

What about *now*? What will you do right now?

I am speaking to God's people. I am calling to every humble soul. Come and pray now. Then, go and seek the Lord obediently.