

“I tell you,” said Jesus, “if the disciples should fall silent the stones would cry out.” Why? Because praise is as necessary for life as water.

When the Israelites came to the wilderness of Zin, the community had no water. The people complained bitterly. They wanted to know why Moses freed them from slavery to bring them to an evil place: no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, no water? Better to have died as slaves.

God commanded Moses to gather the community before a rock. Moses struck the rock twice with his staff and abundant water came out. The community, with its animals, drank their fill. Thirst was slacked, but the lamenting persisted. And the people wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

Just as we cannot live long without water, we cannot live free without praise. Praise frees us from the prison of self-absorption. Thanks and praise are like mana; they sustain life in the wilderness. The essential nutrients of respect, personal worth, and identity, fortify the soul. Praise is as necessary as water for the flourishing of life.

Praise enlarges the mind’s capacity to understand. When we find something of quality and express our appreciation, that very expression *adds* something to the situation. This is even more true in the case of the praise of a person. To recognize worth and to respond to it with praise is to create a new relationship.

This new mutual delight is itself something of worth, an enhancement of what was already valued. Like lovers writing letters or just looking into each other’s eyes, the expression of appreciation is not an optional extra in the relationship; it is intrinsic to its quality.

There are always great dangers in this of unreality, dishonesty and manipulation. These, however, are not inevitable. Despite its risk of misuse, praise remains vital to healthy relationships.

Most people have experienced at least moments of delight in another person. These moments inspire all sorts of generosity and creativity.

The Irish have a saying, “Praise youth and it will blossom.”

When the soul praises, life enlarges. Such praise is like watching nature on a spring morning. At first, the flowers are closed and withdrawn. Then, ever so gradually, as the rays of the sun coax them, they open out their hearts to praise the light.

The diminishing of praise is an acute poverty in our culture. We have to hope God is a great deal kinder than we are to one another. We have a habit, Marilynne Robinson contends, of thinking only cynicism is honest and that is a terrible blindness.

Only as we receive love and affirmation do we begin to have a sense of our own worth and the confidence to develop. A young woman confessed, tears streaking her cheeks, “For the first time in six years, someone expressed appreciation for me and my work.”

The plea for recognition is heard from the cradle to the grave and beyond. The very stones we erect to mark our graves cry out.

Praise and adoration of God is the essence of our vocation. What is the chief end of humanity, asks the catechism? Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. In appropriate ways, our vocation entails praise of people, which helps establish right relationships.

Right praise is not an optional extra in life but is the fundamental condition for happiness and for staying in harmony with reality. Only, asserts David Ford, in right praise are truth, beauty, goodness and love appropriately blended and fulfilled.

I will try, writes Mary Oliver.
I will step from the house to see what I see
and hear and I will praise it.
I did not come into this world
to be comforted.
I came, like red bird, to sing.
But I'm not red bird, with his head-mop of flame
and the red triangle of his mouth
full of tongue and whistles,
but a woman whose love has vanished,
who thinks now, too much, of roots
and the dark places
where everything is simply holding on.
But this too, I believe, is a place
where God is keeping watch
until we rise, and step forth again and—
but wait. Be still. Listen!
Is it the red bird? Or something
inside myself, singing?