

2021 May 9 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: John 15: 9-17 and Psalm 98

Title: “So That You May Love”

Theme: Eastertide, Stewardship Sunday

Intro

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth. Break forth into a joyous song and sing praises!

For many of us, the pandemic has, at least in part, been a time of learning how to be comfortable with singing along with hymns at home when we do not have the benefit of an excellent choir giving us our cues and helping us feel like our voices can blend into the mix without us being judged.

At least a time or two I saw my cat walk out of the room when I was singing during the pandemic.

We hear in our scripture that we are to praise God and sing out. Even for those of us who are musically inclined, this year has been a tough one in which to find our mouths full of joy. At so many turning points there has been bad news - and I don't just mean in the news cycle. In each of our personal lives we have experienced loss and for us church-going people, even those of us who only attend on Easter and Christmas, we've often felt our spiritual center has now been sucked into the computer.

And yet, our scripture remains:

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth. Break forth into a joyous song and sing praises!

Time and again, this year, we have dug deep into our hearts and minds to find simple joy in the places where we had forgotten it resided. Joy in a simple fire, a phone or video call instead of a text message, a baked good for someone stuck in quarantine, singing in the shower. And joy for us - as we have seen our church continuing to bless people throughout the pandemic. I arrived at this church in early October and in just over 6 months, I can already say that the list of people we have impacted in that time alone is countless.

Furthermore, I include myself in that list of people. A church this size is not typically blessed and blessing in the ways this one is - reaching upwards of 15-16 communities, having people tune in from all over the United States, having a successful capital campaign during a pandemic, and sooooo much more.

Okay, as the pastor, of course I think we are special, but that is not that point here. The point is that we ARE making joy, we ARE coming together for joy, even in the midst of these struggles.

We don't always know how to support each other and we don't always know how to support the people who show up to our doors but we do our BEST to show Christ's love as we work to listen to needs. We do our best not just to give but to be a gift.

Theologian Barbara J. Essex lets us know of a couple reasons that Psalm 98 should matter to us; she notes:

“First, it is an invitation for Israel to sing a new song for a new setting.”¹ You might recall that many songs are of lamentation and struggle - and that is all okay and important - it’s great! However, the people are called to sing in some joy even when they struggle. I believe the same is true for us. In no way am I saying that we should ignore our struggles or our feelings of suffering but we do need to look for the joy in our hearts. It does exist somewhere, just like it did for these Israelites. Essex notes that in Psalm 98 the people, “sing and remember,” and I absolutely see how this applies to us. We are about to enter a phase of time when we will have to look to our past to imagine our new future as communities. In order to sing we will have to recall the days prior to the pandemic, when we felt we had more relative freedom and our worries were fewer. Sing and remember, we must.

The other reason Essex notes this Psalm is important for us goes like this:

“Psalm 98 remind[s] us that we stand before and worship a God who loves us.” She goes on to say: “We are in bondage to too many things.”²

As we are in bondage to things then it is our work to make sure we are breaking free each day and also ensuring that other people around our community see how God is the one creating possibilities for us. We can’t just accept God’s love, we must proclaim it for those around us.

¹Barbara J. Essex, “Psalm 98 - Pastoral Perspective,” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 486.

²Essex, 486

Let's turn to that gospel now - this is one I preached on not too long ago, I think around late fall. Jesus presents the commandments here in the gospel of John and then says: "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

This is our word.

So that you may love.

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth. Break forth into a joyous song and sing praises!

. . . . So that you may love.

We want to be the people who create a path of peace for those we encounter. We don't just want to be free of bondage ourselves, we want to create this for other people because in doing so we will necessarily free ourselves.

Giving to the church financially, Stewardship, caring for our community with money - this isn't about lining any coffers and piling up unnecessary amounts of wealth - this is about continuing to be a beacon of love and hope for the people who see our steeple from I-93 in the middle of the night and wonder if there is a greater purpose or meaning.

This is about what that steeple means to the questioners, the ones who only hear about us in passing. This is about the fact that in our church, you belong even if, especially if you cannot give financially. This is about a love so much larger than any amount of material wealth.

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. . . . So that you may love.

This is also about caring for each other within the church. As a community, we hold one another - we send cards, we make phone calls, we offer prayer. As a few of you know, I am somewhat obsessed with a relatively new netflix series called Grace and Frankie. Fair warning - this show can be pretty crude. But it is sweet, too, and is about transitions throughout life and about friendship.

In an episode I was watching the other day, a character came upon some struggle, a health problem which he didn't want to reveal to his friends and family. The character was upset when a few of the family members found out and he went on and on about how he didn't want people to worry about him. One of the main characters (Frankie, played by the wonderful Lily Tomlin) says to the fella with the health issues:

“Tough noogies, bud, that is the way this works; think of it like a pie - we all get a piece of the worry so you don't have to worry about all of it alone.” As I heard this description I knew this was a perfect summary, too, of what stewardship is all about.

Some people in our church can take a bigger piece of the pie and some people are not able to have pie this year, but they volunteer. We share the worry and the responsibility, that is what community, that is what family, that is what church is about.

And this sharing of responsibility, it is so that we may love:

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth. Break forth into a joyous song and sing praises!

. . . so that you may love.

~11 mins

Please join us in singing #473, blessed assurance.

Bibliography

Essex, Barbara J. "Psalm 98 - Pastoral Perspective." *In Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 486. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.