

Sermon: Joyful Heart

Year A, Proper 24

[Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9 \(10-13\); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22](#)

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There are things the church does so well. On the individual level, when society treats someone as inhuman and an object, the church comes in and says, “We promise to see what is uniquely human and subjective.”¹ We will remember that particular bodies and particular lives matter. Not just to God but to us, in part because they matter so much to God. Sometimes it’s something like when you guys fixed the frozen windshield squirter on my car, so I could safely drive down to Art’s funeral in New Jersey later that day. Sometimes it’s the take home meal that appears on your door step or the baby basket or the ride to church or the bouquet of yellow roses, that you knew were someone’s favorite flower.

On the community level, the church also works pretty well. We fill in short falls like haircut gift cards at the start of the school year, and gift cards for shoes. We make sure that the town has what it needs to help out folks who are a little short, whether that’s from the food pantry or through fuel assistance or with medical equipment needed for just a little while. Sure we have senior luncheons, and that’s good, but I’m not sure that everyone knows that luncheon’s often end with folks taking home more food. And we always send over a couple meals to the guys at the Transfer Station. The church is good at creating the connections that are lacking in society, good at providing warmth and authenticity.²

The church is also good at providing balance and order in the midst of rapid change.³ The church has a deep history to draw on. The church has always been on the side of the poor and the oppressed, so we’ve gotten rather good and figuring out how to hold to our beliefs in the long term. We perform sacred rituals at birth, marriage and death because those moments are monumental in the lives of individuals and the community and there needs to be a institutional recognition of those moments.

The church does all those things well. That alone is reason enough to fill out your pledge card during this season of Stewardship. Barbara Alves from Marguerite’s Place will be here next week, talking about the work that they do and we support. Next week, some of us will attend the Annual Meeting of the New Hampshire UCC to strengthen and support our institutional longevity. Next week, we’ll serve runners from inside our community and out a great Spaghetti Supper to make sure their bodies are ready to run a marathon. In two weeks, we’ll have our Halloween Senior Luncheon and serve the community Chicken Parmesan, but really we’ll be serving them time together, to chat and visit with each other. In two weeks, we’ll meet again to build up our skills at listening to the Holy Spirit. And the band is playing today then again on November 19. All these things we do pretty well and we’re working to do better at. All of these good things are worthy of every single one of us filling out a pledge card, so we, as a body can

¹ Andrew Purves, “Proper 24, Theological Perspective, Matthew 22:15-22” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 190.

² Purves, 190.

³ Purves, 190.

focus on doing all this good work and not worry overly much about whether we need to have one more Breakfast Buffet to meet our fundraising goal.

With the lives we live, this is so doable. This church has an incredible skill at finding and inviting everyone to contribute not only financially, but also through the additional activities of the church. For many churches, 75% of the people who attend on Sunday do nothing more than attend and hopefully put some money in the plate. If that's what they can manage, that's great and they're more than welcome. But in this church, everyone is doing something. And usually something they're good at. Although I know that Peter, Ron and Bob wish they weren't quite so good at getting the line out to the septic tank unclogged.

There is always more that we wish we could do. More songs to practice and include in worship. More volunteer opportunities. More people we'd like to help. More vigils we'd like to attend. Another reason to fill out your pledge card.

Frankly for a church with roughly 30 people in attendance every Sunday, we're doing pretty well with the balance. In today's reading, because of the way Jesus frames his response to the Herodians and the Pharisees, it sounds like there's a rough equivalence, "*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*" (Matthew 22:21). It gives the impression that we're looking for some kind of balance. So much goes to Caesar, so much to God. During Stewardship season, the minister and the stewardship committee argue that a greater percentage of our financial assets should be going to God.

We can understand the balance argument. Yes, with more financial resources, the church could help more individuals, provide a richer community life and set deeper institutional roots. We are called as followers of Jesus Christ to do all those things. So let's re-adjust the balance in our giving.

And yet, we have been growing in awareness as individuals and as a community that fulfilling those three roles isn't enough. In fact, when all we do is fulfill our role on the personal, communal and institutional level, that's exactly what we're doing. We're playing a role. And we're playing a role that the society wants us to play. When we speak to the wider society from our three roles, we only say what society wants to hear.⁴ And that is a new captivity in Babylon.⁵ We are saying that our lives can be partitioned up so that we serve Caesar and we serve God. And that's fine with society, so long as we keep serving Caesar. There's a place for everything and everything in its place and we're keeping the place that society wants the church to stay in.⁶

As a church we've been realizing that Jesus is not tidying up our lives, he's testing them.⁷ Caesar can have all the stamped pictures on all the coins he wants. And he may get most of the coins that flow through our lives. But we were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Our names are written on God's palm (Isaiah 49:16). God's word is written on our hearts. (Romans 2:15). We bear the image and inscription of God, our lives bear the mark of the One who created us and to whom we will return.

⁴ Purves, 192.

⁵ Purves, 192.

⁶ Richard E. Spaulding, "Proper 24, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 22:15-22" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 190.

⁷ Spaulding, 190.

And because of that, even as we are fulfilling our individual, communal and institutional roles as a church, we are also proclaiming the Kingdom of God.⁸ Because Jesus called us to do that too. What is the Kingdom of God like? It's like this. Right here. In this little country church. Where people don't agree all the time. But there is something here that gets us up on our feet to share our family stories. It gets us up on a July morning, to worship God with a Muslim neighbor. It has us making meatballs, and scanning page after page of music. It has us willingly going to all church meetings and saying what we think.

And yet we don't yet know exactly how to share that experience with others. Because think about it. Think about this week. Puerto Rico, Hurricane Nate, wildfires in California, murders and rapes and deaths from opioids. How can we go out to people who we think we'd like to share this thing we call church and tell them that what makes us so special is our belief in the coming of the Kingdom of God. It's more than personal, communal or institutional. We're not just another not for profit. We're working towards the coming of the Kingdom of God. How do we say that to anyone outside a church community and not sound detached from reality. And yet that is what this church has decided to do, get better at saying "Come and work for the coming Kingdom of God" or, more precisely, "Come and work for the coming of the Kingdom of God in the face of all the evidence that the Kingdom of God is nowhere to be seen."

Most of us have not seen God going before us and leveling the mountains. Or breaking in pieces the doors or bronze or cutting through the bars of iron or giving us the treasures of darkness and the riches hidden in secret places. (Isaiah 45:2-3) We believe in a God that formed light and created darkness, who makes weal and creates woe (Isaiah 45:7). But we have not seen it.

Except that we have seen it. We just don't always recognize it. For the offeratory today, New Beginnings is going to sing "Joyful Heart." Written by....? Indeed, Kristine and Gary. So let's start there. We have seen people who have been so touched by the coming of the Kingdom of God that they wrote a song about it. In fact we see them just about every week. And this song says, "Sing with a joyful heart, with the angels my voice rings." Now, I haven't asked them about it and they are absolutely free to correct me, but I'm willing to bet that their hearts were not joyful 100% of the time they were writing that song and furthermore their hearts are not joyful 100% of the time when they sing that song. Fair? And *that* is working towards the coming of the kingdom of God. When you believe in and long for the Kingdom of God so much that you are willing to sing about a joyful heart, even when your heart is not joyful. You sing about a joyful heart so that you put your stake in the ground that that is what you're living toward.

That's what we're pledging our financial support towards. Towards the efforts this church is making to share what we have with others. We're not pledging because we think we offer a better balance between Caesar and God. We're pledging because we are saying and acting like our whole lives belong to God. We're pledging because we're willing to take on the individual, communal and institutional roles that society is comfortable with us filling. We're pledging because we're figuring out how God is calling us to share the work towards the coming Kingdom of God with others, even if we're not exactly sure how to do that yet. And we're pledging because of our joyful hearts. Our hearts may not be joyful 100% of the time, but we're living into the reality that they will be, with God's help.

⁸ Purves, 192.