

Sermon: Make a Joyful Noise  
Sunday, May 6, 2018  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 98, John 15:4-5, 9-17  
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In our first scripture reading, Psalm 98, all of creation joins in a new song of praise and Yahweh is elevated to king of the world. The people delight in Yahweh's new governance. Not only has God defeated the powers of chaos to make an ordered life possible within creation, God's new governance will be one of righteousness and equity. Hear now the reading of God's holy word.

*O sing to the LORD a new song, for God has done marvelous things.  
God's right hand and God's holy arm have gotten God victory.  
2 The LORD has made known God's victory;  
and has revealed God's vindication in the sight of the nations.  
3 God has remembered God's steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.  
4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.  
5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.  
6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.  
7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.  
8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy  
9 at the presence of the LORD, for God is coming God will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading, John 15:4-5, 9-17 includes the metaphor of the vine and branches to describe the relationship between Christ and his followers. This is Jesus' final "I am" saying and part of his Farewell Discourse. Jesus' parting words are meant to give his followers strength for the days following his death, strength in the intimacy of friendship and strength to love one another as Christ has loved them. Hear now the Word of God.

*4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.  
...9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in God's love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants<sup>[a]</sup> any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Make a Joyful Noise

*The text: Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Psalm 98:4*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we join all of creation and our children in a joyful noise as we celebrate your order in the midst of chaos and the love of Christ which transforms lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditation and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we drove into Assisi, Italy, the summer of 2006, we felt as though we were driving back into time. This charming, clean, quiet, medieval mountain town drew us in. The Denham-Kieffer extended family was also exhausted as we navigated the driving trip to visit our Italian relatives and artist friends from Milan to Torino along the Italian Riviera to Florence on our way to Venice pre-GPS. Our intention was to stay in Assisi for one night; however, we elected to spend three days in the birthplace of St. Francis and forego Venice.

We found some of St. Francis' peace and goodness in the town of his birthplace. The churches of Francis, Clair, and Rufino were beautifully preserved and working relics. Quaint shops and boutiques lined narrow cobblestone streets while many homes were along pathways and stairways.

It was powerful to be in Assisi where Francis entered the world nine centuries earlier around 1181 C.E., The son of a prosperous silk merchant and a noblewoman, Francis lived a life of wealth and privilege. However, he soon became bored with the aloofness of the wealthy lifestyle and discovered within himself a compassion for the poor, something his father distained in him and something for which his father cruelly punished him. Eventually, Francis chose to walk away from his father's control by surrendering his inheritance. This freed him to live his faith with authenticity and become the person God intended him to be.

Some say that no one else in history was as dedicated as Francis in imitating the life and work of Christ. Francis is credited with reforming and reviving the medieval church of Italy. We delight in this initiative as Presbyterians, reformed and always reforming. He extended a hand of peace and respect to the Muslim community in the unfortunate era of the Crusades. He was an advocate for the poor in a world where they were shunned and mocked. His followers in the Sisters of St. Francis continued his advocacy for the poor here in Springfield by establishing St. John's Hospital in 1875. Francis believed that nature itself was the mirror of God, called all creatures his brothers and sisters, and had a deep and abiding respect for God's creation. The current pope, known for his dedication to interfaith relations, just treatment of the poor and care for the environment, chose Francis for his namesake.

Francis lived his life with the righteousness and equity of the God for whom all creation and the ancient psalmist made a joyful noise in Psalm 98. Francis understood the heart of Christ's gospel, the counter-intuitive call to forgive, to love, and to put others before oneself. Francis "considered himself no friend of Christ if he did not cherish those for whom Christ died." This is the message of Jesus' final discourse in John 15. The call to abide in Christ is an invitation to love one another as Christ has loved us. This way of life is reflected in the beloved prayer of St. Francis.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is discord, union;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*

Judith Viorst's book Imperfect Control: Our Lifelong Struggles with Power and Surrender has been the text for the Ruth and Naomi Circle this year. On Wednesday we discussed the chapter "Varieties of Surrender" which explores the times when surrendering power is an expression of human maturity. She quotes Dr. David McClelland, twentieth century American Psychologist, who offers an analysis of how we progress to the place when mature surrender is possible.

We each begin our journey with Stage I as infants receiving power and strength from an outside source—our parents. We obtain our power in this stage through our dependency. As we grow and learn both self-control and self-assertiveness, we move from external control to internal control. In Stage II, our strength comes from within as we exercise personal autonomy. Stage III defines the impact and influence we have on other people through our internal strength and power. Arriving at Stage IV, "the most advanced stage of expressing power," some, like St. Francis, acquire the capacity to choose to surrender private goals to a greater goal or authority. It is here that strength is expressed through acts of self-subordination and surrender, by serving as the instrument of a higher power or purpose. One can willingly choose to lay down one's life or to surrender one's wealth or privilege for a greater cause.

Judith Viorst concludes by saying, "Some of the strongest people she has known are men and women who believe their inner strength comes from God and who are willing to make sacrifices for their faith and for those they love."

By the grace of God, may we emulate our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as did Francis of Assisi. May we live lives that are open, compassionate and respectful. May we live lives that make a joyful noise in mature surrender, love, and gratitude. So be it. Amen.