

JOY AND GRATITUDE

Psalm 100

November 18, 2007

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I would like to begin with three announcements.

First, we hope all of you will come downstairs following the service for our Alternative Gift Market. It is a great time to buy some unique gifts for the holiday season, plus an opportunity to meet and mingle with each other. We will have a gathering as soon as everyone can be downstairs to recognize Joe Conn and celebrate with him, and then, on the stage, there will be a sandwich lunch for a suggested donation of \$5. This money will go to the pastor discretionary fund – which has run very low on funds this year. So come down, enjoy the event and the people, and those who can – we encourage you to go down these front steps to get people downstairs faster.

Second, this word comes from Chris Stockwell-Goering, the chair of our Stewardship Committee. He had to be in Alabama today, and asked me to share this on his behalf. “I want to give thanks to the congregation for embracing something new – I am excited to celebrate we have received about 86 Estimate of Giving cards thus far, and 20% of those are from folks who did not make a commitment last year.

I want to invite those who have not yet chosen to make an estimate of giving for 2008 to do so today so that we might have more clarity in the initial stages of creating our mission spending plan for 2008.

In God’s creation – we are never alone – and our calling to practice our faith is never something we do alone. Thank you so much.”

I would like to add my thanks to what Chris has said. I am very pleased with what I am seeing this year – and as I look at the list of those who have yet to make a commitment, if each of us turns in an estimate of giving card, we have the opportunity to joyfully give more than ever before this year – and that opens the door for our ministry to really take off here in this place.

Finally, one last announcement. I got word yesterday – and the person who sent it to me said he didn’t know the source of this official drought information – but: It’s so dry in Georgia that the Baptists are starting to baptize by sprinkling; the Methodists are using wet-wipes, the Presbyterians are giving out rain-checks, and the Catholics are praying for the wine to turn back into water. That’s really DRY!

Such silliness does bring home the point that we are in a most severe drought. Sometimes it is hard to keep this in perspective when we can just go to our faucet, turn the water switch on, and we get water. But it is essential that we conserve as much as we can. The governor has asked us to cut our water use by 50%. So far, we as a state have only done so by about 25-30% - a good start, but not enough. I think we in the church need to help

lead the way – and I urge you to do whatever you can to use less water. My family met a week ago in a family meeting and we discussed what we could do – from taking shorter showers to only using water that was necessary – including only washing clothes and dishes with a full load. As stewards of Earth, I hope you will join me in an effort to conserve as much as possible.

Will you now pray with me:

O God, we come to be together today to strengthen our spirits, to enliven our souls, to feed our minds, and to increase our love. We come seeking your presence in the words that are spoken, the music that is sung, the prayers that are prayed, the bread that is broken, and the celebrations we share. Fill us God as we turn unfilled to you again. Amen.

I went to the holiday parade here in Asheville yesterday to just mingle in the crowd and to enjoy the festive spirit. I like to watch people – and to wonder who they are, what is going on in their lives, and to especially watch the delight on the children's faces as they marvel at the jugglers and dancers, the drummers and musicians, the fanciful large scale animated figures and the clowns, and of course, Santa Claus. The parade yesterday seemed to include the diversity of Asheville more than in year's past – meaning there were less conservative churches with floats and handing out tracts, and more creative expressions of the joy and life of our whole community.

The Asheville holiday parade has always come the week of or before Thanksgiving. It kicks off a festive season that starts with a day of giving thanks. The traditional Thanksgiving story put aside, it is a good thing to take a day to remember with gratitude the gifts of our lives. It is a good thing to reconnect with our joy.

Psalm 100 is a call to worship. A call for the people to gather and give thanks to the God of life. To be joyful. To be generous in living out and sharing the gifts that God has given us. And those gifts are not determined by external circumstances. Our joy is not about what happens to us, but how we live with whatever comes our way. Our joy is within us. It is God given. Our gratitude shapes our attitude.

Life is going to bring us plenty of adversity and struggle. Some of us will find ourselves facing unexpected illness that threatens our well-being – perhaps even threatens our lives. Some of us will have to cope with a sudden death of a family member or friend. Others will live through separation and divorce. For some of us we are just on the edge of financial security – knowing that if we lose our job we have no cushion to fall back on. The drought reminds us that there are circumstances beyond our control in nature that we must find a way to live with as best we can – and that we need to work together to come up with good, creative solutions to the problems. And drought is just a small piece of a larger issue of caring for Earth.

We could just get depressed with the struggles and wonder where God is – and if God doesn't do anything to help us, why should we do anything. We must be careful of this

slippery slope. What Psalm 100 reminds us is that God is God, God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all generations. So make a joyful noise, even if things don't seem joyful. Remember that the joy is inside of us. Remember that gratitude shapes our attitude.

Dale Turner, in his book *Different Seasons*, says "it is the grace of gratitude that gradually overtakes and overcomes grief." And then he tells this story about Dr. John Claypool, one of America's greatest ministers. Dr. Claypool writes about the evolution of his emotions following the death of his daughter. First he writes about his anger and despair, which is where we all must begin. But then he writes this:

"We can understand something as a gift and handle it with gratitude, a perspective Biblical religion puts around all of life. And I am here to testify that this is the only way down from the Mountain of Loss. I do not mean to say that such a perspective makes things easy, for it does not. But at least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try to thank God that I was ever given her in the first place."

We are not to be thankful for everything – according to Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians, but we are to be thankful in all things. That is the difference I want us to hear today. Not thankful for war. Not thankful for disaster. Not thankful for illness and unexpected death. Not thankful when violence erupts. But in the midst of whatever comes, we live from joyful and thankful hearts. And in so doing, we discover that our blessings are more than we had ever realized.

This morning I woke up about 3:10am. Before the alarm went off. I cut the alarm off and decided to stay in bed and just think on my sermon some more. For some reason I was not afraid of falling asleep again – I was not anxious about finishing the sermon. And I did fall asleep. I dreamed of being in a church with people I didn't know. It was like I was there – but also like I was observing from a distance. It was a diverse group of people. The building was fairly old – nothing particularly charming about it. Things were broken and in need of repair. And yet, there was among these people a contagious joy. I felt inside of me a desire – no, really, a need to be there. I knew that I needed to be with these people for some reason. Their joy called forth my own joy. I felt like dancing – which many of you know does not come easily for me! I felt like singing. I felt alive. The more I was with these people, the more I realized that they really didn't know what they were doing as a church – a feeling I often have! They didn't even know who was going to preach that morning – which was perhaps my own anxiety creeping in. But one thing they did know. The most important thing. They felt gratitude and joy. They let that shape their attitude. They came to worship with a spirit that said – God is with us. That alone is enough. We have all we need.

Today we have come together to make a joyful noise. To be together as the church. To offer our praise and thanksgiving for our lives – no matter how hard or messed up they

be. Our joy is not dependent on anything other than God's spirit in us and around us. As we live more and more into that spirit, we find that we have more courage, more energy, more hope, more faith, more love, more resources than we ever knew we had. We begin to make the shift to invest ourselves in the gifts of God instead of the expectations of the culture. And we together become a church shaped by the joyous spirit of God.

You are probably aware that when I gave the stewardship report a few minutes ago, I did not give any amounts of money. Our whole emphasis this year is not to raise a budget, but for each and every one of us to give joyfully and generously what we can give. We are trusting that there is enough resource among us to live into the vision God has for us. If everyone will give what they can. If each of us will give whatever it is that expresses our joy and our gratitude for the God who is always with us, always caring for us, always holding us, always loving us. Our ministry spending plan will grow out of the estimate of giving that we have written on the cards and turned in. We know there is enough to do what God calls us to do. You will not hear me stand in front of you week after week after week and beg you to give more. We are asking very simply and trusting in you and God – give what you can, as much or as little as you can - and it will be enough.

Today we share the joy of our faith. We sing our gratitude with songs of thanksgiving and praise. We gather together to ask for God's blessings. So may it always be.