

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee  
Psalm 150

August 11, 2019 – First Congregational Church of Meredith NH  
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I have to admit that my sermon last week was a little heavy. It was about heartbreak, after all. But I have good news. This week, I'm going to talk about joy. And for this I have to introduce you to my 6-year-old grandson Simon. His picture is on the cover of your bulletin. This was taken when he was four, I think, and his preschool class went on an autumn field trip to a farm. In addition to the usual corn maze and a small petting zoo, this farm had a shallow bin of dried corn kernels for the kids to play in, and Simon dived right in. He laid back so that only his face was sticking out, as you can see. Fortunately, my daughter Anna Cathryn was a chaperone for that field trip, and she snapped this photo.

This picture is pure Simon. You can see the sheer joy in his face. You can almost hear the giggle that he let out when he jumped into the corn. And those dimples! They just make you smile.

Simon carries joy around inside him all the time. Joy is his natural state. And it bursts out of him in ways that invite everyone around him to be joyful, too. He inspires tickling and knock-knock jokes from those around him. I have a video of my husband Dave and Simon laughing dementedly on the sofa when Simon was just two. When it comes to joy, Simon is a natural.

Joy doesn't come so easily to all of us, which is why we need people like Simon so much. And I'm thankful to Helen Robinson for sharing stories with me about her son Andrew. I think he must have been one of those people, too, like

Simon. Andrew's motto was "Don't postpone joy." And he had a formula for it, which included admonitions to Give, Love, and Risk.

"Give," Andrew said. "Give to others. Just give." There is joy in the giving.

"And Love," Andrew advised. Notice he did not say "find someone to love us." He said we should love. Joy comes in loving. I would add that there is joy in loving God, which we will get to in a moment.

"And risk," Andrew said. Now, Helen would probably tell you that Andrew took risks that she wished he had not. But Andrew found joy in taking risks. And even those of us who are much more cautious than Andrew can find joy when we push our own rigid boundaries even a little in order to experience life and nature and the people around us in new ways. And sometimes we just need to venture a few steps outside of our walls to find joy.

"Don't postpone joy," Andrew said again and again. I wish I had had the pleasure of knowing him. I bet he would have reminded me of Simon. I'm sure he would have made me smile, and he would have challenged me to get out of my rut in order to experience life in a new way, in order to experience joy.

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Our scripture this morning, Psalm 150, is all about praising God. Praise God in the sanctuary, it says; praise God in all of Creation; praise God because God has done amazing things.

And our call to worship, Psalm 100, begins, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord." Praising God is an act of pure joy. Praising God is not quiet. It's noisy. It is exuberant.

When you praise God, the psalm says, you just want to sing and dance. Feel the praise of God rising up in you so you can't help singing and moving around because God has done amazing things.

When we sing hymns this morning, we are making a joyful noise to the Lord. I understand that when Andrew Robinson preached in this pulpit, he said that singing hymns made him feel like he was praising God. We should all feel the joy of that praise when we sing. That's why I asked you to pick your favorite hymns today.

You may know that I spent much of my life in the Presbyterian Church. Classic Presbyterian theology is all about what they call election: John Calvin wrote that those who are "saved" are chosen by God before the beginning of Creation, and so Presbyterians are sometimes referred to as the "chosen ones." But Presbyterians, especially long ago, could be very somber, and Presbyterians today sometimes poke a little fun at themselves by saying they are the "frozen chosen," you know: serious, unsmiling people who stand stiff and straight when they sing.

Sometimes I think Congregationalists are frozen, too, when we sing hymns. It's like we are working really hard not to feel the emotion that is behind many of them. But the psalms tell us that when we praise God, we should be genuinely joyful about it. And Andrew would urge us to take that risk. The joy of loving God should fill us so completely that it spills out into the music we make and it inspires us to move around a little.

The psalm also tells us to praise God with whatever instrument we have at hand. Praise God with trumpets and cymbals, it says. Praise God with stringed instruments: violins and lyres and guitars. Praise God with electric basses and

acoustic guitars and ukuleles. Praise God with tambourines and drums. Praise God with a steel drum and a kettle drum and a snare drum and a pencil marking rhythm on your desk. Praise God with a pipe organ and a piano.

Make a racket praising God. Never mind the person in the next pew. Praise God anyway, and make a joyful noise about it.

Praise God because you are overwhelmed by God's greatness, and you just can't keep it inside you. Bring everything you have, everything that is in you, your whole self to your praise of God.

This week Jane Jenness and I led the communion service at Golden View, and we had a large crowd – twenty folks! I am always a little challenged when I prepare a worship service for this group because some patients are there for physical rehabilitation following surgery, and some are living with dementia and other cognitive impairments. It's a wide range, and I am challenged to create a service that will be meaningful for all of them. What I have learned is that the songs we sing and the familiar bits of liturgy are meaningful because they echo something deep inside them. So, I read scripture and say familiar prayers and I offer communion and I keep my sermons short.

So, this week, I read this same psalm to them, and then said a prayer, as I always do, and I began a much shorter version of this sermon. And what happened next was the very best example I can imagine of someone making a joyful noise to praise God with whatever they had available to them.

When I got to the end of the psalm, I read, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!" From the back of the room I heard, "... and pass the ammunition." Throughout my brief prayer, we could all hear this person

humming, searching for the tune to that song, dredging it up from some deep place in her memory. As I started my sermon, the song finally burst out of her: Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition. Over and over again, sort of quietly at first, then louder and louder. She never quite found her way to the end of the song, so she kept circling back to the beginning, as though illustrating exactly what I was saying in real time. It was a joyful noise, and it called on this patient's deep, long-ago memories that the phrase "Praise the Lord" had triggered. In her song, she brought everything she had to the table, and I felt joy in that moment.

The psalm tells us to praise God with everything we have and everything we are. So, take a risk. Let the joy of praising of God come as readily to your face as Simon's dimples come to him. Let praise burst out of you in joyful song and dance.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Amen