

“CELEBRATING Our Ministry”

Psalm 100; Luke 13:31-33; Matthew 13:44-46

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As you hear these short gospel readings, words of Jesus, here are a couple of things I want you to keep in mind: Jesus said, the “kingdom of God is in your midst.” And... one of the six “Great Ends [purposes] of the Church” is “the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.”

From Luke, chapter 13:

“Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

“He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

From Matthew, chapter 13:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Our Worship Team has chosen “Celebrating Our Ministry” as our worship theme for the 2025-26 year. It seems simple enough at first hearing, maybe even a bit... ho-hum. But the more I think about it the more I look forward to exploring some of the ideas and questions it suggests.

You can probably guess what was behind this choice of theme: during the coming year (well, nine or so months) we’ll be moving into a period of transition for Westminster, as Jerry and I prepare to retire at the end of next June, and as the Session, staff, and other leaders prepare for the changes that will come.

It seems to me that transition is always characterized by questions around what’s changing and what’s remaining the same. I anticipate the push-pull, the tension of those questions will be top of mind for us over the next several months. And that’s why I’m glad about our worship theme.

This theme invites us to reflect on the nature of the church’s ministry. On what changes with time and circumstance, and what is constant. On the church’s purpose. On all the activities and commitments encompassed by the word “ministry” - feeding the hungry, singing together, stewardship of resources, comforting the grieving, baptizing babies, preaching and teaching, praying with and for one another, and so much more.

It invites us to ask what God is calling *us* to do at this time and in this place. To reflect on what is the role of the Spirit and what is the role of our efforts and gifts in carrying out ministry. On what is wonderful about ministry and what is hard. On where we have been faithful and where we have faltered. It invites us to pay attention to where and how God is working among us... and within us. It invites us into gratitude for the ways we have been blessed by the ministry of the church and the ways we have been privileged to participate in that ministry.

Today and for the next two weeks we are going to begin by “unpacking” those three words, “Celebrating our Ministry.” I get to talk about “celebrating.” ☺

Now, *celebrating* might sound like rather a trivial thing, unserious; and after all, *ministry* is a serious endeavor. Celebrating might seem a waste of time and energy, maybe even insensitive, in the face of the pain and struggle so many people are carrying right now – including our loved ones, and members of this faith community. The world is on fire, people are suffering, our country is coming apart at the seams. Values like truth and compassion are mocked and turned upside down. As always, the most vulnerable are disproportionately affected, and everybody’s anxious. We can’t forget all that. And there is so much to *do*.

What’s more, the challenges facing the church at this moment are not insignificant – cultural shifts in religious affiliation, so many things competing for people’s time and attention, financial stresses, more needs than we have energy to address, internal disagreement over issues large and small, ever-changing technologies (what *does* AI mean for the future of the church??)

Does celebrating reflect an entirely-too-rosy view of where we are?

And does it maybe seem a little bit like “tooting our own horn”?

We probably need to take care to avoid both of those wrong-headed ways of “celebrating.” Because they miss the heart of it, the reason we can and do come together in gratitude, rejoicing, and celebration: it’s ultimately not about us, or even about our circumstances.

The life and work of the people of God is essentially an expression of God’s grace. It’s founded in the belief that God is good. *All the time. All the time. God is good.*

That’s our motivation. The bottom-line reason we continue to be church, the conviction that makes ministry possible and sustainable. More than that, God’s goodness is the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the well we draw on for all that we are and do. We see God’s goodness imprinted on everything God has made – and we are drawn to it; we want what’s good for our neighbors and for God’s creation. It’s a *gift* to partake of the goodness and participate in the good work of God.

Joy is appropriate, and so, sometimes, is celebration.

Still, for some of us, joy is often more theoretical than real. Maybe we aren’t convinced we are worthy of it, or don’t feel free enough to let down our defenses and give ourselves over to joy.

Often we are so very focused on the needs, the worries, the responsibilities we can't quite put down; joy gets crowded out. Circumstances of our lives or the sorrows around us seem to put a barrier between us and joy. I get all of that. I feel that, too, right now.

But in the worst of circumstances there can be moments of joy.

And when the church is genuinely – even imperfectly – trying to *be* the church, there are always joys. There are these glimpses of “the realm of God” that Jesus said was in our midst: A precious jewel of a moment. A treasure of a truth painstaking sought and painfully unearthed. A seed of faith taking root in somebody's life. Spiritual food for the soul or actual bread made and shared. Experiences that reveal God's presence and grace. There are always these joys.

Here are just some of mine:

-Christmas Eve and Easter morning.

-Hearing the kids in our pray-and-play space, knowing that they know they belong at church and that they are learning about worship and love and God ... from us!

-Seeing a child of the church grow up to be an amazing, hardworking, compassionate, and faith-filled young man.

-The people who can't get to the church regularly for worship, but are with us on-line every single week; you know who you are!

-When Jason writes us a new anthem (or tells me a joke!)

-The synergy I feel every spring as art and poetry and faith and earth care and community come together in our Art Festival.

-The light in someone's eyes, or the emotion in their voice, when they're moved by a new perspective as we're studying scripture or looking at a piece of art, discussing a book or questioning an old assumption.

-The way God always seems to provide what we need – the right person, the resources, the fresh approach, the new opportunity.

-When somebody says to me, after a tough week, “how are *you* doing?”

-ALL the ways that folks in this congregation find to serve.

-Watching folks come to the front of the sanctuary each week to light candles, knowing your deep concern for loved ones, the losses you are mourning, the hopes you're holding on to... and sensing the kindness and caring flowing between you.

You probably have your own list of church experiences that shimmer with grace, show you God's loving presence, and fill you with joy. Your own reasons to celebrate the goodness of God that is real in our midst. Some of those reasons may be small but none of them is trivial. And they are worth attending to, worth lifting up because they lead us to gratitude, praise, celebration, joy. And joy – even when it comes in small moments – lifts us up, frees us,

refreshes us for the next steps of the journey. Shared joy connects us. The Holy Spirit is in our joy and our praise, and the Spirit's presence opens our eyes and minds and hearts to more of God's goodness, which reinforces our joy and gives us new strength.

Sometimes we do need reminders, encouragement, to come into this place of celebration and praise and joy. I guess that's not surprising; maybe people of faith always needed to remind each other to make space and time for celebrating God's goodness.

That's what I hear in Psalm 150: the people of God urging one another to joy and praise and celebration. "Praise the Lord! Praise God in the sanctuary." Repeating this over and over (13 times in total). This is what members of a faith community do for each other: help each other to notice and remember and express the joy of partaking in God's faithfulness.

There are two things I particularly love about this Psalm. One is that it knows how big a part music making plays in our joy, praise, and celebration. The other is the specificity: it doesn't just say "music" or "instruments," but delivers this litany of trumpet, lute, pipe, strings, cymbals, tambourine, and so on, it gives us a picture of a whole band (along with dancers) and a soundscape of voices celebrating God. I think we've actually included most of those things in worship here at Westminster one time or another, except maybe a lute – but the point isn't those *particular* instruments. It's the coming together in joy and gratitude with whatever instruments, means, abilities we have ... to celebrate being community, being church. So I took the liberty of a little re-write of Psalm 150 for our context. Let me close with that:

Praise God in the sanctuary!

Praise God at home.

Praise God in under the sky and in the streets.

Praise God for goodness unending.

Praise God with choir and piano, strings and trumpet and occasionally a drum.

Praise God with laughter and squeals of children.

Praise God with clapping and candle flames.

Praise God with cameras and screens.

Praise God with offerings and wonderings.

Praise God with heavy hearts and dancing feet.

Praise God together, all God's people.

Let everything that breathes praise God.

Praise the Lord!

Amen.