

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
November 6, 2022  
Psalm 98:7-9  
Together for Joy: Our Commitment

We are continuing our worship series *Together for Joy*. This morning we hear the final section of Psalm 98.

Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the world and those who live in it.  
Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing together for joy  
at the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is coming  
to judge the earth.  
God will judge the world with righteousness  
and the peoples with equity.

**This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The Psalms are a favorite book for so many because the imagery speaks so powerfully to our souls. Let the floods clap their hands – let the hills sing together for joy. Now we often don't think of floods as good things, but for the people of the ancient near east, melting snow from the mountains and drenching rains brought new life to the desert – flowers and figs; new shoots of wheat and juicy pomegranates. Even before Rodgers and Hammerstein could entice Julie Andrews to sing that the “hills are alive with the sound of music” the psalmist invites the hills to sing together for joy. Together for joy at the presence of the Lord. Friends, this is take home message of today's sermon – this is the why – why we gather each week – why we sing together – pray together -study together – eat together – play together – and yes give of our resources together. We understand that while we certainly can, and often do experience the presence of God when we are alone, there is something incredibly powerful in the way we experience the presence of God in community.

The Catholic priest Richard Rohr has written much about the transformative power of solo contemplative practices – of prayer and journaling – of walking and meditation. And yet to me one of his most compelling statements is one about community – a quote I shared in the words of preparation in today's bulletin – “...we are saved not by being privately perfect, but by being “part of the body,” humble links in the great chain of history. This view echoes the biblical concept of a covenant love that was granted to the Jewish people as a whole and never just to one individual...”<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this fall, I shared the stories of the covenant God made with Noah and with Abraham. In a few weeks in Advent we will hear the story of the covenant God makes with David about his lineage – the royal line which will culminate in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. That covenantal love will be shared around the table in just a short while, as hear those words Jesus said at the Last Supper – “this cup is new covenant sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of this in remembrance of me.”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr. *Daily Meditation: Part of One Body* <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/part-of-one-body-2022-11-01/>

Covenantal love is love made with promise and commitment. God promises that God will be with God's people, caring for us, caring for our world, caring for our future generations. God is committed for the long haul, even when we stray. We, in turn, covenant to be God's people, to be committed to following God's way, God's lead, God's call in our life. And we covenant to do this as God's people in community, for we are created to be in relationship – created to be social animals.

“The Social Animal” is the name of a book penned by New York Times columnist David Brooks. Brooks uses two fictional characters Harold and Erica to explore themes of loneliness and connection, particularly the need to be understood by others. While many attribute our uniqueness as a species to our higher cognitive and reasoning abilities, Brooks attributes it to our social skills. He describes our human story as a story of fellowship, saying, “...We are like spiritual Grand Central Stations. We are junctions where millions of sensations, emotions, and signals interpenetrate every second. We are communication centers. We become fully ourselves only through the ever-richening interplay of our networks.”<sup>2</sup>

The interplay of our networks...in a world where political, cultural, theological, - you name it - polarization has made our networks into smaller and smaller echo chambers rather than junctions of new perspectives, explorations of meaning and purpose, broadening appreciation for differing viewpoints, I believe the church can be - and should be - a place to reverse this trend. I believe this church – the Presbyterian Church of Okemos is just such a place. A counter-cultural place where we strive live together for joy. Where we show up for each other. Where we when we experience hard things – we do so together. We share each other's burdens. And when we experience blessings – we celebrate the joy with each other. Because none of us goes through life alone. God commits to walk with us on the journey of life. And we commit to being Christ to each other. And it is in this commitment that we live together for joy.

Friends, it can be hard to claim that joy in our world today. There is much that we need to be serious and sober about, and yet as we have been hearing in our scripture, we are called to be a people of joy -a people together for joy. Over the last few weeks, I have posted prompts on our social media pages, the bulletin board and in the e-announcements. A number of questions have asked about things that bring you joy. It may be trite and a bit self-serving, but reading through the responses has been such a joy for me. For one, it has helped me get to know you better as individuals and as a congregation. To see common threads woven together to make a beautiful tapestry. To hear about the joy our children and grandchildren bring us – and the importance of savoring every moment as they grow up. The joy of our pets and how deeply we miss them when they die. The glory of creation – the beautiful fall with the leaves ablaze in color – the magnificence of the lakes that surround us, the quiet of a snowy day, and lest I sound like a Pure Michigan commercial, the recognition that we are fortunate to live in such a beautiful state, with four seasons that each bring unique gifts.

I have especially loved reading about the ways in which this church has been a source of joy. The responses reflect a deep held commitment to the greater community, with a number of people commenting that our commitment to mission and our care for the community bring

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks. *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*. Random House, 2012, p.xvi

them joy, as does our commitment to caring for the environment – composting and recycling, native plants, and our solar panel array. The majority of the responses were centered around our commitment to each other – celebrating birthdays on birthday cake Sundays, working in the kitchen preparing food with church friends, sharing meals together, singing in the choir and ringing in the handbell choir. This commitment to each other is not superficial – rather it reflects a deep appreciation that we truly know each other and are truly known by each other, where we develop “friendship of souls” and a community of love and trust is formed. It is the kind of covenant love Richard Rohr speaks about, “...we are saved not by being privately perfect, but by being “part of the body,” humble links in the great chain of history.”

Yes, we are humble links, humble links in the great chain of history. But like all of the humble links who have gone before us and all of the humble links that will come after us, we are part of the great arc seeking to build God’s kingdom here on earth. Some days building that kingdom seems like an impossible task. Over the past few decades, sociologists tell us that fewer and fewer people are making commitments to institutions. Surveys report that fewer and fewer people identify with a religious denomination – the rise of those known as the “nones.” And the isolation and distancing that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected our communal ties in the church and throughout society. My email inbox is filled with newsletters and articles about the death of the church. Some articles lament what we have lost, some offer “6 easy ways to grow your church post-pandemic,” and some speak to the transformations that are happening that we can’t yet see or appreciate.

Amongst the myriad of articles I have read on this topic, one article that captured my attention was by Dr. Brian Bantum, a professor of theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois. He argues that the way to change history is for each of us to live out our story and to live out our collective story as a people of faith. He says, “As a new academic year begins, I am welcoming students called to some form of Christian leadership: pastors, chaplains, nonprofit leaders. I’m introducing them to histories but even more to the particular history and the tangle of beliefs that led to and derived from Scripture—itsself a book of descriptions passed on, written and rewritten for the sake of the people the writers were walking with.

But I often wonder about the people Jesus walked with, those he healed or challenged. How did they perceive him or their moment? Did they see history unfolding? More than likely they simply told their story. They shared what happened to them or their sister or the man they always passed on the corner on the way to buy bread. They shared the stories they heard repeated from town to town. And then the stories begin to accumulate, build up one on top of the other, maybe even bend or twist, depending who was doing the telling.”<sup>3</sup>

Friends, we have story to tell here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos. It is a story made up of hundreds of individual stories where we have seen and felt and tasted and heard God at work. It is a story of the power of words written so long ago, to a people in a very different world to inspire us to show our love for God by loving our neighbor. It is the story of a smile or hug that made you realize you were not alone. It is a story of forgiveness and reconciliation after years of estrangement. It is a story of the power of prayer to heal, to strengthen, to bring

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Bantum, The Way to Change History is to Live Out Your Story. *Christian Century*, August 26, 2022. Available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/way-change-history-live-out-your-story>

peace. It is a story of the joy of gathering around the table and sharing a meal or piece of birthday cake; the joy of the sanctuary decorated for the holidays; the joy of dancing a second line on Jazz Sunday. The joy of being together. And it is a story of commitment. A commitment made nearly 60 years ago by an intrepid band of believers who had a vision for a family of faith here in Okemos. A commitment made by those who have loved and served and built this church in the ensuing decades. A commitment made by your Stewardship Team chaired by Doug Paterson and including Patty Wilson, Gary VanKempen, Jane Paterson, Dave Detrisac, Frank Webster, Bill Given, and Jeff Arbour.

On behalf of this Stewardship Team, we are asking you today to make a commitment. To make a commitment to this church – to this community of faith. To make a commitment to be there for each other. To make a commitment to be grounded in God’s love and grace and not succumb to the divisiveness and ugliness so prevalent in our world. To make a commitment to serve – to recognize that every member is a minister with a unique calling. To make a commitment to build the next chapter of our life together here at PCO – to be the contextually relevant, communal, innovative, and visionary<sup>4</sup> church we believe we are called to be. To make the stewardship of your resources of time, talent, and treasures part of your life as a disciple of Christ. And yes, I am – we are - asking you to make a commitment to financially support this church through your pledges of tithes, offerings and gifts. To make a commitment of generosity with gratitude in your hearts for all that we are together.

Next Sunday we will dedicate our pledges and our Every Member in Ministry Time and Talent sheets. You will be invited to come forward and place them in a basket – all of our commitments intermingled. It will be a powerful testimony to the story we will tell in the future about how God called us and blessed us and how we answered that call. The following week on November 20, we will give thanks to God as we share in an Agape Meal as part of our worship service. Together for joy. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>4</sup> These terms are from F. Douglas Powe Jr. Missional Characteristics of an Adept Church. *Ministry Matters* <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/11452/missional-characteristics-of-an-adept-church>