

These are a Few of My Favorite Things! Reading: Mark 6:30-34; 53-56 P11/B 7/18/21

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Today is my last Sunday with you at St. Barnabas. And I want to thank you for welcoming me and being so gracious. I am delighted that we will have an opportunity after the service for a cup of coffee and time to schmooze. Because this is my last Sunday, I would like to talk about a few of my favorite things in today's sermon. I will begin with the secular and move into the religious although from God's point of view, all things are sacred. And so I will focus on the sacredness of my favorite things.

Let's begin with my favorite kind of dancing. The reason I am leaving before your rector returns from his sabbatical, is because we are headed to New Orleans for the annual National Clogging Convention! I love everything about clogging. For those of you who are not familiar with clogging, it is a bit like Irish dancing with an American mountain flair. It requires special tap shoes, strong knees, agility, focus, and a desire to have a good time. So if you have never seen clogging, then give it a google or better still, join me in New Orleans this week. And while it will be hot and humid there in July, the people who clog are friendly, humble, funny, and enthusiastic. What's there not to like!

This leads me to mention a few of my favorite singers, one of which sings a hilarious song that you can clog to: "I'm still not dead again today!" Willie Nelson is one of my favorite country singers who is very dedicated to his vocation. I once saw him in concert at the Cow Palace. Instead of the usual 1-2-hour performance, he sang for 4 hours straight. He so loved sharing his music that he didn't worry about his voice or getting paid extra or fret about what the managers of the venue would think. He simply picked up his guitar and sang and sang and sang. Forty years later, I still remember that evening!

My next favorite singer is Susan Boyle, a rags to riches story. Susan was raised in a blue-collar struggling family. Being on the Asperger spectrum, she was bullied as a child. As a woman, she was chunky, awkward, & not very attractive. Yet she was gifted with a beautiful voice. She sang in the church choir but wanted to share her gift of singing with a larger audience and perhaps make a decent living. She rose to fame in 2009 after appearing as a contestant on the third series of *Britain's Got Talent*, singing "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables*. Her dream was to become a professional singer "as successful as Elaine Paige." I heard Susan Boyle in Sacramento about 8 years ago. Like Willie, she sang and sang and sang throughout the concert. She has sold over 19 million albums and is an inspiration to any of us who are searching after a dream that sometimes seems unreachable. Life becomes meaningful when we share our gifts generously like Susan. So know your gifts, share them, and never give up on your dreams.

It is rather obvious (I hope) that I love the traditions of the Episcopal Church. My favorite liturgical season of the year is Advent, the four weeks preceding the celebration of Christmas. I love hearing the organ crank up and blasting out the hymn, "Hark a Thrilling Voice is Singing," which we sang today as the opening hymn. I look forward to lighting the first candle of the Advent Wreath, a symbol of the light extinguishing the darkness. It reminds me of one of my favorite passages in the Bible—the prologue of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [The Word] was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* (John 1:1-5)

This passage is packed full of theology that has implications for how we view and treat this created order. It claims that the Word of God was at work in the world before the birth of Jesus and that this Word (or *logos* in Greek) is imbedded in all creation. "All things came into being through the Word." And if we were to embrace a continual awareness of God within, then we would genuflect before one another, treat our Mother Earth with respect, and care for all of our creatures as being sacred.

Two thousand years ago, this Word of God became fully incarnate and expressed in the human person of Jesus. That is why we follow Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If you want to know God's desire for humanity, then look at Jesus' way of love which includes compassion, generosity, justice, peace, and healing. Finally, this passage from the gospel of John gives us hope for the future; for without hope, the human heart would break. It emphasizes that although there is darkness in our world, it will not triumph in the end. "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

Finally, as we arrive at the lighting of the last candle on the Advent wreath, we culminate with the celebration of the Light that has come into the world with the birth of Jesus. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, [has come] into the world and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:9;16) “Joy to the World, the Lord has come; let earth receive her King!” (hymn #100)

Now choosing some of my favorite hymns is a bit more difficult because there are so many of them that I like. I do however, prefer the upbeat ones with a descant. But even then, it is hard to pick just one. Lately, I have been meditating on the hymn “Abide with me.” In my own personal spiritual journey, my desire is become like Christ in thought, word, and deed. And while I am still only inching towards the kingdom, allowing this hymn to infiltrate my thoughts, encourages me to step back from my ego and allow the Holy Spirit to direct my thoughts in service to God and my neighbor. After all, thoughts matter!

The mind is a powerful force. How and what we think influences our actions! Every emotion, every action, begins with a thought. Good thoughts bring good emotions, bad thoughts bring bad emotions. The words you mutter to yourself and the thoughts that you dwell on have the power to encourage or discourage, to motivate or deflate, to generate joy or generate sadness. Little by little, the conversations that you hold in the privacy of your mind are determining your destiny. Each thought can move us toward or away from our God-given potential. So I continue to sing, “O Lord, abide with me.”

In today’s gospel, when Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd and “had compassion for them... And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” (Mk. 6) Jesus had an exceptional gift of healing which I admire. Healing the sick was the hallmark of Jesus’ ministry; a concrete example of his love for humanity. Tending to the sick, the lost, the lonely, and the left-behind was what brought the crowds to listen to him in the first place. Tending to the sick by lay people is what also converted many people to Christianity in the initial years of the Jesus Movement.

In the early church, when an epidemic would hit a city, the pagan rulers, people with money, and even physicians would flee to the hills to get away from the plague. They left their sick behind without care or the basic necessities of life. Yet it was the Christians who tended to remain behind and care for their loved ones, for each other, and even for the pagans. Filled with the Holy Spirit and asking themselves *what would Jesus do*, they risked their lives to care for the sick. Simply by the act of providing adequate water and warmth, survival rates increased up to 30%. By adding a dose of prayer and compassion to the mix, Christians could rely on an even higher success rate in keeping the sick alive.

Today, we will commission Steve Jerrick as a Stephen Minister of this Church. Stephen ministers are lay people who are committed to being agents of love, healing, and mercy, by listening to the pain and struggles of those going through difficult times. Although they have been trained for many months, they are not psychologists or professional medical care givers. They are simply people of faith, who believe in the healing power of the Holy Spirit. They have committed their time to being a patient listener in a hurried world, a healer of divisions, and a comforter to those in need. I give thanks to Steve and all the Stephen Ministers among us. If you have need of a Stephen Minister caregiver, or if you would like to be a Stephen Minister in order to share the healing love of Christ, please get in touch with Deacon Susan.

Finally, I want to say a few words about joy. One of the ways we know that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit is through its fruit: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Joy is my favorite fruit! Joy is not the absence of sorrow but a lived experience of the presence of God. And while not everyone has the natural gift of joy, we can cultivate joy through spiritual practices. In his letter to the Church in Thessalonica, Paul offers the congregation a recipe for cultivating joy in their lives. He tells them: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1Thess.5)

One of the ways I cultivate joy in my life is through the practice of gratitude. Giving thanks throughout the day reminds me that my blessings far outweigh my difficulties and sadness. For instance, I give thanks for the opportunity to be among you for these past ten weeks. I give thanks for having a home on the Central Coast, being able to walk the beach each day and delight in all the wild life. I give thanks for my partner Steph, for my dog Siggy, for my faith in God, and for the Episcopal Church to which I was ordained. Joy is the mark of a Christian. Joy is the final word in Christianity!

And so on that note, we will end our service today singing: “Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of Glory, Lord of love...teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine.” (Hymn #376)