

Sermon: Finding Joy in Sanctuary
6 Easter, Year A
John 14:15-21

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Do you sometimes feel far away from God? That maybe he exists somewhere out there but doesn't really affect your day to day life? Maybe you are feeling that the God you believe in or once believed in is rather aloof, doesn't hear your concerns, perhaps doesn't connect with your life. Doesn't really give a rip about your joys or your worries because he is just that detached, that remote.

Well, today's Gospel reading from John offers a very different take on God's presence. Here Jesus is speaking to his disciples in what is known as the Farewell Discourse, as he is preparing to head to the cross. Having already washed their feet, to show them that to love is to serve, he tells them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...and you know him, because *he abides in you, and he will be in you.*" This Advocate, the *Paraclete* in Greek, sometimes defined as comforter, counselor and more often as the Holy Spirit, abides in you and me!

This passage reveals something deeply important about God and about your life, both your personal life and the life of the faith community. That as we walk in the way of God, God is not only with us but acts in and through us. Jesus says, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." All of the commandments of God really boil down to love, loving God and neighbor, all neighbors, no exceptions!

Years ago I attended the Community Foundation's Dawburn Award ceremony where one of our parishioners, Mike Harmon, received an award for his teaching. When he accepted the award, he said that he considered his school and particularly his classroom, a sanctuary, where students could come and be safe, a place where they were free to talk about anything without repercussions. Sanctuary can be defined as a refuge or place of safety; it is a holy place, stemming from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means holy. We've heard of bird sanctuaries, sanctuary cities.

If, as John tells us, God dwells in us, might this mean that we ourselves can offer sanctuary to others? It might mean in a huge way such as offering a place for refugees or it might mean in smaller ways such as in listening to people, really listening to them. In the book that our Sunday School class is reading, Choosing Civility there is a big emphasis on listening and how it is key to the life of civility. And in our Living Local Joining God (LLJG) group activities, listening for God through our neighbor is also a central element to determining the mission God has in mind for us. In our weekly Lectio Divina meetings, listening for God's voice within community is THE goal.

How well do we listen? Listen to our spouse, listen to our children, our parents or our friends? Do we listen to our bodies when our bodies tell us to eat more or less, get exercise, rest? How well do we listen to God? Listening is key to any authentic relationship and yet with all the distractions many of us are encountering, listening requires a lot of intentionality.

And yet when we know we have been heard, when someone has taken the time and energy to really listen to us, that can be the source of incredible joy. Joy in being heard, joy in being understood and there is a joy in being God's instrument as we connect with others.

We are still in our preaching series on joy and today we are looking at how joy and listening and sanctuary intersect. Maybe some of you have seen the you tube video where at first you see just part of a woman's face and the camera moves out to reveal she is sitting on a couch talking to a man. Then back to the shot of the lower part of her face where you just see her lips moving as she says,

(she): It's just that there's all this pressure and it feels like it's right there up on me. I can feel it, literally feel, it, it's relentless; I don't know if it's ever gonna stop. And the thing that scares me most is I don't know if it's ever gonna stop. (The camera moves out showing her whole face)

He: you do have a nail in your head.

She: It's not about the nail!

He: Are you sure? Because if we just got that thing out of there...

She: Stop trying to fix it.

He: I'm not trying to fix it ; it's just that if you took the nail out.

She: You ALWAYS do this; always try to fix things when what I want is for you to just listen. She goes on, Sometimes there's this achy, I don't know what it is; I'm not sleeping well at all. My sweaters are snagged, all of them...

He starts rolling his eyes

Then he says: that sounds really hard

And she says: thank you for listening and leans over for a kiss and of course the nail interferes so it ends badly. (Script by Jason Headley)

Listening. It is not always easy to do. It takes time and energy. It means laying aside our own egos. Listening deeply means not anticipating what someone is going to say and not anticipating what we will say back to them; listening well means honoring the holy in the other. Often as we listen to other people we will hear the voice of God. And that may come as a surprise. And as you offer sanctuary to others, God's voice may come through to them as well. And in that connection in community, there is joy to be found. Joy in the listening and connecting, joy in the understanding. Joy in the love.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is present, here in this church building, in this sanctuary and Jesus has promised that as we walk in love, that the Holy Spirit is with us, you and me. And not just *with* us but dwells *within* us. So I wonder how, this very day and throughout the week, can we bring an element of joy to others by being sanctuaries for them. Sometimes we really do need to fix things! But today can we consider how can we offer places of safety and holiness by listening to others without judgment, by being present in the moment with others, secure in God's love? The (Holy Spirit) abides with you and (she) will be in you!

I have a sanctuary song I'd like you to sing with me. The choir and I will sing it together and I invite you to join in as you are able. Let's sing it through, just the chorus, 5 times.

Amen.

Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary

Pure and holy, tried and true

with thanksgiving I'll be a living

Sanctuary for you.

Written by John Thompson/Randy Scruggs