

Bob Griggs

I wrote this sermon before the two mass shootings in our country yesterday, leaving twenty dead and twenty-six injured in El Paso, Texas, and nine dead and sixteen injured in Dayton, Ohio. These are numbers that tragically are certain to increase. The sermon I wrote for today is about joy, celebration, and pleasure – which may seem much beside the point in the face of such violence. But I don't think so. In the face of evil we need the good, the joyous, and the life-giving to sustain us.

More than that, this sermon is also about resilience, what it is that keeps us from giving up when confronted by the worse in life. It is resilience that will keep us from giving up as we struggle to end gun violence and bring peace to our troubled country.

The sermon starts with a story. I was in the hospital because of depression. The unit I was on had a large commons area, where patients gathered simply to hang out. One day I noticed an elderly woman there, sitting and simply rocking back and forth. I knew that some people living with mental illness do this, and I felt bad for her.

She beckoned for me to come over – I was a little bit scared actually – but I went over to her. I sat down in a chair across from her where I had a good view of her rocking. Suddenly I understood why she kept rocking back and forth so rhythmically. She was in a rocking chair. Once again I was reminded not to jump to conclusions, and as Jesus teaches us, “Judge not.”

While we sat and talked, she shared with me from her Styrofoam bowl of mixed nuts. She explained that they had come in a glass container, but the hospital did not allow her to have any glass. She went on to tell me a lot of her life story, many disappointments and losses. But she was determined nonetheless to find happiness. Then she told me something that I have taken to heart and found to be deep wisdom. She said, “The problem was that I took my eye off pleasure and that made all the difference. I'll never let that happen again.”

Like my friend with whom I shared the mixed nuts, the psalmists knew the importance of pleasure. You can see this in our call to worship, a mashup of phrase from different psalms: “Praise the Lord.”, “In God's presence there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.” and “Taste and see that God is good.”

Psalm 98, today's scripture, continues this liturgy of celebration: “Make a joyous noise to the Lord.”, “Break forth into joyous song.” and “Sing praises to the Lord with trumpets and the sound of the horn.” I've been working on a free, non-literal translation of some of the verses of Psalm 98, to make it even more relevant for today, and have come up with this: Praise the Lord, make a joyous noise to the Lord. Break forth into joyous song backed by the instruments of the Imperial Cornet Band, including horn, flute, piccolo, clarinet, saxophone, trombone, tuba and drums.

As I said it's a very loose and non-literal translation. But it's not so farfetched. Many of the psalms were intended to be accompanied by musical instruments. We may be a lot closer to biblical times than we think.

There are 150 psalms in the bible and together they cover the full sweep of human emotion from the heights of joy to the depths of sorrow. There's a parallel with the music of the band. Their music bring joys and celebration to our service, but some of it comes from the time of the First World War, reminding us of all the conflicts and suffering that marked those days.

Over the years, I've preached here several times on the psalms of sorrow. I need – I think there are times that we all need – their fierce honesty about how hard life can be. They give words to times of grief, loss, and sorrow – times like today. Their presence shows us that the bible isn't hiding from bitter truths about life.

We need them, but we also need, and need just as much, the psalms of joy. They are also honest and every bit as true to life as the psalms of sorrow. They give us words to express our joy, happiness, and delight in being alive.

This Sunday, high summer in Minnesota, with flowers on the bulletin and the band in our sanctuary, is a good time to hear these words of celebration and thanksgiving. It's a Sunday to experience the joy of faith, to draw close to God who is the fount of every blessing.

In the face of the events of yesterday, I can't read these words without commenting on them. To emphasize what I said earlier, we need to experience how good life can be in order to face how bad it sometimes is. Otherwise, hope vanishes, and we cease in our work to make things better.

When thinking about the importance of joy, something popped into my mind that I hadn't thought about in many years. It comes from the time when I was a young associate pastor, serving a church in New Hampshire. As soon as I wrote this, I heard the voice of one of my sons saying, "Wow, Dad was a young, associate pastor. Was that during the McKinley or Taft administration?"

Putting slander aside, what I remember is a summer when I took a youth group from that church in New Hampshire up to the conference camp in the White Mountains and from there on a four day wilderness hike. I'm remembering what happened at the end of a day of hiking. After the tents were up, the trail food rehydrated, and the crushed marshmallows toasted and burnt, we gathered for worship around the campfire. I read some verses and said some words, but by far the best part was the singing. The kids loved one camp song in particular. It's called "Pass It On".

There's some lines in it that go, at least as I remember them, "I'll shout it from the mountain top. That's how it is with god's love once you've experienced it." Of course as we

sang the kids did shout, they literally shouted it from the mountaintop. And why not? There wasn't anybody within miles, and if we shouted loud enough, it might scare the bears away.

For me this shouting from the mountain top was pure joy, the very essence of worship. It easy to believe that the writers of the psalms of joy were looking down on us, smiling with pleasure, maybe echoing our shouts of joy with their own.

I wonder, now so many years later, if the members of that youth group remember our camping trip as clearly as I do. They might remember the rehydrated trail food, how it tasted better if you ate it with your eyes closed. But of course what I hope they remember is the worship, the singing, the shouting from the mountain top. The joy and the pleasure of it. Because that's a memory that would serve them well.

I say this because it's life's joys and celebrations, times of sheer happiness, that sustain us when life is not joyous, when we are hurt and disappointed, when we are tempted to just give up. Times like this morning when we wake up to yet more news of terrible gun violence.

Life's joys and celebration, happiness and pleasure, grow resilience, which is simply the ability to get up when life knocks us down. In my life's experience, resilience is pretty much the key to survival. This is what my friend on the psych unit knew. Take your eye off pleasure, forget the joys of life, neglect all that feeds resilience, and you'll lose the desire to go on living.

Today we're hearing the psalms of joy – praising God with horn, flute, piccolo, clarinet, saxophone, trombone, tuba, and drums. We're celebrating all that makes life worth living. We're building resilience in the house of God. What the psalmist said is what we're doing now: "Taste and see that God is good."