

How Do Community, Worship and Joy Intertwine?

Friends, long-time and newer, we offer each other the gift of companionship by gathering as community this morning. We find ourselves here on the beautiful start to a long, hot mid-summer day. We are gathered with land that has been relationship with people for millennia before us. As we move into the part of our worship when we invite today's Scripture readings to illuminate our lives (nudging us in both challenging and encouraging ways), let us first pause to pray.

Spirit of God, Lover of creation, as we mediate on sacred texts from long ago, we trust you to breathe a fresh word into each of our lives and into the life of our church. Grant us courage to hold ourselves in a receptive posture – receptive to the truth of your love. Amen.

Friends in faith, what makes a braid strong? It was not until after I had formed the title question for this morning – How do community, worship and joy Intertwine? – that I realized this would be a message about braiding. Has any of you who enjoy hanging laundry outdoors to dry ever tried using (not braided but) twisted rope as clothesline? I now understand why it was nearly impossible for the line to become taut in my backyard!

Twisted rope is formed from two strands continuously winding around each other. A rope twisted from two strands is stronger than a single strand because any load it carries is shared between the two strands. A twisted rope is also quite flexible in terms of stretchiness (a quality not true of a single strand).

Braided rope is stronger than twisted rope because the load is shared among three weaving in and out, in front of and behind one another.

A braided rope is less flexible than twisted rope (it only stretches so far!), yet more flexible than a single strand. And have you ever experienced the movements of a French braid? Aidan French braided my hair often when we were children. The original three strand somehow have the kind of flexibility (the grace and openness) to incorporate new strands into the whole.

In our journeys with faith, we often draw on scriptures and theologians who offer various metaphors involving the weaving of multiple parts into a whole. Creator, Christ, and Spirit are three manifestations or roles that comprise a singular divine essence. The Apostle Paul wrote of the church as many member or body parts interdependently comprising one community united in the love of Christ.

I wonder this morning, what are the core thread that hold you together as a person? I'll ask you to consider naming one of your threads aloud in a moment if you feel open to it. **What is weaving together fluidly when you feel strong and reasonably flexible?** Let's assume Love or God is universally present in all of the strands of your braid. Today, I understand my core threads to be appreciation, effort, and humor. Let's hear aloud a few other strands that weave each of us together. What is one of the core strands that contributes to your individual vitality (your strength and flexibility)? *[thanksgiving, sympathy, faith, help, endurance, honesty, perseverance.]*

There is beauty in our variety. If we are intentional in appreciating our diversity, we will build an increasingly strong and flexible church. Let's keep moving toward this question: how do community, worship and joy intertwine?

Our reading from Second Samuel invited me to notice those three strands – community, worship and joy. But first, the song from the Psalmist’s heart sets the tone.

In today’s reading of Psalm 24, the writer envisions a worshipping community as a collective of persons seeking God’s face – persons approaching Love with clean hands, pure hearts, honest intentions, and humble openness to forgiveness. We heard:

*“All who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do no lift up their souls to what is false,
nor make vows deceitfully.*

*All these will be blessed by the Heart of Love,
and renewed through forgiveness.*

Such is the promise to those who seek Love’s face.”

And later, we heard: *“Who is the Compassionate One?*

*The Beloved, strong and steadfast,
the Beloved, firm and sure!”*

We opt into church – this community of faith within the St. Croix Valley – because we recognize the opportunity to witness in one another clean hands, pure hearts, honest intentions, and humble openness. **I wonder: Who is one person in our church who comes to mind as someone who embodies one of those qualities, encouraging it in you – clean hands (ready for work), a pure heart, honest intentions, humble openness?**

I encourage you to reach out to that fellow community member today, be it in person or by phone or a note in the mail (many of which my son Sam has appreciated in recent weeks). Don’t wait to share this affirmation of how someone embodies a quality you appreciate.

Let's shift to our reading from Second Samuel and the lessons it has to offer us about weaving together community, worship and joy. To be clear, this is a passage about a mighty army of 30,000 soldiers. They regularly engaged in violence and forced occupation of lands that they believed were theirs to conquer. Especially in light of yesterday's events, let's be clear that each of us is capable of nurturing life and of diminishing life. We will do well in coming days to become ever more aware of the ways in which we are nurturing life and the ways in which we are diminishing life.

Let's hear an excerpt from the first part of the reading: *"Then David and the whole force set out for Ba'lah in Judah to return the Ark of God, which bears the name of God who sits enthroned above the cherubim... David and all the people of Israel celebrated to their hearts content before God, with songs, harps, lyres, tambourines, rattles, and cymbals."*

This part is about community. At its best, a community gathers and grows for a purpose. And in this case, the community gathered to celebrate their experience of God's presence so evidently with them. Thanks in great part to the work and focus of our congregation, or Strategic Vision Task Force will soon present to us the fruit of our work – clear statements of our values, our vision, and our mission for this congregation. That purpose of being a community will help guide us into all our coming endeavors. We need community.

We also heard this part about worship: *"David went down and brought the Ark up from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When the bearers of the Ark of God took their first six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fatted calf."*

David... danced before God with all his might, while he and his whole house of Israel brought up the Ark of God with shouts and the sound of trumpets.”

I have always loved that verse that says, “David danced before God with all his might” Do you dance before God with all your might? Or what DO you do with all your might or the greatest amount of your might? Because that is what you are worshipping – that ultimate focus in your life. David danced before God with all his might.

And finally, we heard this bit about joy: “The Ark of the Covenant was brought in and set in its place within the tent David had set up for it. Then David made burnt offerings and peace offerings before God. ... [T]he ruler blessed the people in the name of God. Then he distributed among the people of Israel present - to each woman and man - a loaf of bread, a cake of dates, and a cake of raisins. And all the people returned to their homes.”

In this snippet, David is showing us how to share joy in community – how to share joy as one of the most vital resources we could possibly share and how to delight in one another’s wellbeing (in one another’s sense of having enough).

May we, too, braid together into a strong and flexible body community, worship and joy – today and in all the days to come, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church @ People’s Park
Psalm 24, 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19