

“Come to This Place with a Song!” (2)

Psalm 100 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 2, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be filled with thanksgiving and our lives with laughter and song. In Jesus' name, Amen.

One might think that joy has been hard to come by over the last year. Global pandemics have a way of bringing anxiety and grief to the forefront. But humanity is tenacious, and I suspect that our grasp on joy has something to do with it. In preparation for preaching about “making a joyful noise” today, I asked my Facebook friends, just yesterday morning, to name a sound that qualifies as a “joyful noise” for them. In less than a day, I received around 150 answers! Even if we haven’t been experiencing it much lately, we still have a very clear understanding of what joy sounds like.

A lot of the responses fell into expected categories. Sounds related to children got the most votes – babies laughing or cooing, children playing, and numerous specific sounds that particular beloved children make. Laughter as its own category was a big winner too. Sounds from nature were a popular choice as well, with birdsong and the noises our pets make the most mentioned (and the two I’m hearing while I type up this sermon!). Music was the other biggest category, with half of those answers making reference to a particular song that brings someone joy.

There were some other responses that were far more specialized, like the applause at a wedding after the happy couple is announced. One parent described the sound of everyone's phone going off at a gathering, because the school superintendent has just announced a snow day. And my mother talked about the joy she feels being at home and hearing Craig Gerdes, a beloved teacher from my hometown with a very distinctive voice, announce the high school football games at the stadium a couple blocks away. There were mentions of coffee brewing and popcorn popping, and the ice cream truck coming up the block.

I got so many lovely answers to this question that I decided to post another. I asked folks to name a noise they make to express joy. This one didn't get nearly as many responses, but you won't be surprised to hear that laughter was the big crossover. Various nonsense syllables and noises were also popular, along with both "Yay!" and "Woo hoo!" Singing got honorable mention for both questions, which brings us a little closer to our point here today. But what is interesting for our specific purposes this morning is that, of all the 150 so answers about noises that represent joy, there was just one that related to money. A friend, who shall remain nameless here, suggested the "Venmo 'you've got money' sound." Nobody brought up the clatter of slot machines, or the sound of a check being ripped out of the book, or the beeps of an ATM, or even change jingling in a pocket. Even more, if you go back and look at the list, most of what's mentioned isn't even something you can buy, at least not directly.

So how do we connect these joyful noises to a stewardship campaign that is designed to inspire us to commit our financial resources to our church? Can joy and money possibly have anything to do with each other? If we turn back to the rest of the psalm, perhaps we will begin to see a connection. The psalmist seems to think that singing is the primary, religious joyful noise. But this joy is clearly related to four other concepts: belonging, gratitude, love, and providence. It's not so much that money brings joy, but that sharing our resources is one way to express our joy and thanksgiving for God's love and nurture.

Money isn't the center of anything, despite the way society may paint it. Money is a tool, a means to an end. And as followers of Jesus, we are invited to use it for specific purposes, namely, bringing into fruition God's desire for abundant life for all. If we go back to that list of joyful sounds that didn't directly relate to money, we can see how financial resources make experiencing those things more possible. Children bring us joy. Children have to be fed and clothed and protected and educated, and sometimes they need trampolines bought for them. Nature seems free, and yet, we know that in order to enjoy it, we need enough financial stability to have free time and the capacity to get into nature. Birdsong may seem cheap, but I will tell you, as someone who's dramatically increased the amount of bird activity around my own home in the last year, thistle seed isn't free. Laughter costs nothing, but is far less likely if we're stressed out about our finances. Singing is free, but musicians have to eat almost as often as children.

Money doesn't bring joy, but money facilitates joy. And that is as true inside the church as it is in the rest of the world. When we ground our stewardship campaign in gratitude, we do it because of God's faithfulness to our congregation through a year of intense hardship. God has brought us through! One day soon, we will, in fact, enter into God's sanctuary together and worship our God with a song! On this day, we take a moment to recognize and give thanks for all the ways in which we and our resources are tools of God's faithfulness and steadfast love. We are invited to participate in the undergirding of joy, by committing ourselves to regular, intentional support of our congregation and its ministries.

I wonder what some of the sounds of joy will be when we come back? The greetings we hear called out across the sanctuary? The bubbling of the coffee maker? The lovely piano we'd only had a few months before the pandemic broke out? How will you express your joy the first time you come and worship in the sanctuary again? Laughter? Tears? Smiles so big they make your face ache? Today we are invited to commit to building up the foundation for all that joy, by participating in our stewardship campaign for the upcoming ministry year. The sound of an Estimate of Giving card slipping into the blessing box is not very loud, but it's definitely a joyful noise. I invite you to add it to your list of happy sounds today! Hallelujah and Amen!