

[PRAYER] [BLANK] Good to see you. I thank everyone for their kind words at the celebration of my birthday last week, and for the nice birthday cake. I am sorry that I was running out the door so quickly after our service, but I am adjusting step by step to being the Pastor of two churches, and I really appreciate your help in this transition. I am now committed to pastoring two churches who need to be one in ministry to God’s world. It is a joy, and a privilege, but it is also a challenge, a challenge that I am glad to take on. It reflects my calling from God to ordained ministries. God called me to be a circuit rider. When I was told what my new assignment would be, there was a part of me that said to myself: “Of course. This is your commitment to God. How could it not be this way?”

What we commit to, freely, becomes who we are. Last week we looked at how our freedom to choose what we do is the only real thing in our lives. Freedom is God’s greatest gift to us, because without it, there is no love. If we don’t choose to love someone freely, as God loves freely, then we really don’t love them, do we? And to love someone freely is not always easy. People make mistakes. People hurt us sometimes through their mistakes. We need to forgive people for their mistakes, again, and again, and again. That’s hard, isn’t it?

[WINDOW] To commit to that kind of love, freely, can be the hardest thing of all. Our Gethsemane window in the back of our church shows Jesus, Son of God, praying to God the Father, for the strength to commit to giving God’s love to the world through his death on a cross. God came to us as Jesus, freely, and died for us as Jesus, freely, so that we could be offered new life in God’s love. And God offers us the freedom to make this same type of commitment to receive the joy of God’s love. [BLANK]

Yes, that’s right. God loving us freely is just the beginning of the story of finding God’s joy. It is the example of commitment to love that God looks for in us. And that commitment can be scary at times to consider. It means moving from talking about love, or thinking about love, or expecting love to pop up magically, to making a commitment to loving, as God loves, as the very definition of who we are, and how we are. God loves us, so that we can commit to loving God, and everyone, like God.

[SUIT] In Luke’s gospel today, we read about a man who was trying to wiggle out of this kind of commitment to God. He was a smart person, apparently comfortable in his life, because he was well versed in legal matters. And this legal expert asked Jesus about the commitment God required from us to have eternal life. Jesus tells this legal expert the simple commitment needed for eternal life: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” [BLANK]

Simple. Commit to loving like God does, and you will have eternal life, now, and later. Simple, but not easy, right? Because it doesn’t leave any wiggle room. No ifs, ands, or buts. So it’s no surprise that this legal expert immediately looked for a loophole, and said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Come on, Jesus, don’t stretch me! Give me something that makes finding God’s joy easier.

And so, Jesus answers him with a simple but powerful story. A man is robbed and beaten on the major road to Jerusalem, and left for dead. His religious leaders walk right

past him, afraid that this man’s impurity will affect how people see them. They want to look like they’re loved by God. But they’re not really committed to loving God and others. They are committed to the look of loving God, but not to being accountable for loving like God.

Jesus offers us two unlikely heroes in this story. The first hero is called the good Samaritan by many people. He is a person who was considered unclean, unreligious, the least worthy of being called loved by God. But this person had two things that the legal expert and the religious leaders didn’t have. First, he had a heart. He saw his unity with the dying person on the road. But for the grace of God, that person could be him. He had what Jesus called...compassion. The Samaritan was connected in the heart, the way that God is connected to us in the heart. And the Samaritan couldn’t let go of that connection.

[HANDS] But that was not all that the man did. He didn’t just have compassion for the dying person. Jesus tells us, he went to him. He held himself accountable for his compassion. Because, without that action, he really wasn’t who he was. He had to commit to helping this person to be accountable for who he was, the way that God came to us as Jesus, to be accountable for who God is.

And that brings us to the second hero of this parable of Jesus - or, at least, a possible hero. The Samaritan goes to a roadside inn, and takes care of the man. Then he pays the innkeeper in advance to take care of the man, and promises to pay him in full when he returns. Jesus doesn’t tell us what the innkeeper actually does. Maybe Jesus did that because the innkeeper is like us. We’re the ones who Jesus asks to commit to accountable compassion, like he did, on the cross. People who do are promised God’s joy, in full, a promise that God will keep, no matter what.

I hope and pray that we commit to such a way of life as a church, together. Two weeks ago, I started inserting into our bulletins a letter, with a checklist of what we can do to be effective at being a joyful church in Christ. The checklist isn’t easy, I know, and I know that everyone, including myself, will fail to do something on this checklist each and every day. That’s all right. The question is, are we committed in our hearts to bringing God’s joy effectively into God’s world? Do we commit to supporting worship? Do we commit to having a personal faith life? Do we commit to sharing faith with others? Do we commit to activities that unite our church? Do we commit to being in ministry to others, no matter what our limitations? Do we commit to new relationships that will help us to be who God meant us to be? Do we commit to the guidance of the church on important decisions? Do we commit to moving outside the box of our comfort zone to find God’s joy? Do we commit to being gentle in how we judge ourselves, and others? Do we commit to trying new ways to serve God?

We’ll have time in the weeks ahead to reflect on this list. For today, just remember that this is a list that brings us to the joy of God. Commitment to God’s love, a commitment made freely, brings us to God’s joy, and brings God’s joy to the world. We need commitments like this to move forward effectively as a church. We can go through the motions. We can do the same old things. We can avoid challenging long-held assumptions and roles. We can justify ourselves, like that legal expert did. We can do all sorts of things,

if we want to. But if we want joy in this church, and in God’s world through this church, then this is what we need to do, and who we need to be.

You may have noticed that we are singing just one hymn today, called “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It was written in 1864, by Julia Ward Howe. She supported the abolition of slavery, and had just visited Union troops on the battle lines, and in hospitals, who were fighting for a truly free nation. She saw the price of commitment, and felt it deeply in her heart. That night, the verses of the hymn came to her in a dream. She woke up, and wrote them down, and then went back to sleep. God had given her a vision that united our nation in a commitment to accountable compassion. It brought President Abraham Lincoln to tears the first time that he heard it. The price of commitment to doing God’s will for our nation was enormous. New generations continue to pay that price, freely, hoping to bring God’s joy to God’s people. There is no other way to find God’s joy on earth. Commit to the way of Jesus, and find everlasting joy, and your own life, and in God’s world, now, and forever. It is our destiny as God’s church, in Christ. I pray that, like Julia Ward Howe, we, too, will have a vision as God’s church, that will lead us to an effective commitment to God’s everlasting joy. Amen.