

What's Behind Those Divine Doodles?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 29, 2018—Fifth Sunday of Easter

- Psalm 98:4-9 (Good News Translation)
⁴ Sing for joy to the LORD, all the earth; praise him with songs and shouts of joy!
⁵ Sing praises to the LORD! Play music on the harps!
⁶ Blow trumpets and horns, and shout for joy to the LORD, our king.
⁷ Roar, sea, and every creature in you; sing, earth, and all who live on you!
⁸ Clap your hands, you rivers; you hills, sing together with joy before the LORD,
⁹ because he comes to rule the earth. He will rule the peoples of the world with justice and fairness.
- Romans 15:13 (Good News Translation) May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Recognize and embrace and express the joy God places within you.

Every week we ask you to sign a "Fellowship Register." It only takes you 10-30 seconds, but I know that some of you may find it tiresome or boring to do that week after week after week after week. Let me tell you why we put you faithful church members through such a torturous task each Sunday. We do have volunteers who track attendance week by week. But the reality is that filling out the fellowship register is not primarily about you. We ask *you* to do it so that *visitors* to our worship services will be more likely to sign the register, too. When visitors provide us with a phone number or address or email, we're able to reach out to them to see if our church might be of help to them. That's why we spend money having the pads printed; that's why we take time each Sunday to pass them along and fill them out.

I don't see all of the fellowship register sheets, but our volunteers do pass along to me any sheets that have information I might need. Over time I've noticed that some people add a little drawing when they write on the form. So about a year and a half ago I asked the volunteers, "Could you do me a favor and give me any sheets that have some sort of doodle or picture on them?" I decided to put them in a file even though I didn't know what I might do with them.

Actually, such incidental artwork isn't limited to the sheets of the fellowship register. When our Crystal our Office Administrator gets rid of leftover bulletins from the previous Sunday, sometimes she comes across some artwork drawn in a bulletin's margins or on the front or back cover. Sometimes we find artwork on prayer request slips. I've even found things drawn on adhesive nametags. Though most of it consists of casual sketches, sometimes the drawings are sophisticated and intricate. (You can see some of those on display in the lobby after the service.)

But this morning's bulletin cover presents a large sampling of the fellowship register artwork of the last year or two. You'll notice that many of the images include parts of a grid simply because that's the "canvas" the artists were working on.

So what do they mean? Are they messages to other people in the pew? To me?

- When someone draws a Christmas tree is she or he really saying, "I need to remember to put up my Christmas tree?"
- Do the drawings of squash and corn and turkeys constitute a shopping list for Thanksgiving?
- Does a drawing of a football and goalposts mean that someone has tickets to that day's Brown's game and hopes that the worship service doesn't go into "overtime"?
- And what are we to make of drawings of cats and dogs? Are they simply from pet-lovers, or do they indicate who the artist would rather be with at that moment?

- And I see lots of hearts and smiley faces and stars (which, by the way, would constitute the limits of my drawing skills).

Actually, although they are some of the simplest drawings, it's the hearts and smiley faces and stars that speak to me most clearly. I think those simple figures are announcing this: joy. Joy! Joy that's not just a fleeting feeling but an enduring trait, a lasting way of being.

When you are filled with joy, when mere words are insufficient to express your delight... what do you do?

Sometimes we express joy through dance.

If you've studied your Old Testament – or if you've ever seen the movie "Footloose" – you know that Psalm 149:3 proclaims "1 Praise the Lord! Sing a new song to the Lord; praise him in the assembly of his faithful people!... 3 Praise his name with dancing..." and that the Second Book of Samuel states that King David danced before the Lord with all his strength.¹ That's how filled David was with joy, excitement, enthusiasm, gratitude. We see that enthusiastic expression of joy in children – watch as they jump around and run around – childlike dance – when they're so excited and happy. Over the years we've been blessed to welcome the Stix Ministry Team from John Knox Presbyterian Church. The youth in that group and their choreographer find songs with inspiring, prayerful texts. Then they put the music in motion through movement – a simple but powerful form of dance. Joy expressed through dance.

Oh, yes, sometimes we express through dance.

Sometimes we express joy through even a simple prayer of thankfulness.

Sometimes we express joy by singing. Hans Christian Andersen said, "Where words fail, music speaks."² We hear examples of that when Glen sits down at the organ console or piano keyboard, or when we hear our Vacation Bible School children sing the songs they learned, or our choirs ring or sing for us, when we join our voices in songs and hymns. Sometimes we express joy through music.

The Bible's book called "Psalms" is an ancient hymnbook... minus the musical notation. The psalms are hymn lyrics; we don't know how the hymn tunes went, probably because each generation learned the tunes by ear rather than from seeing them written down. In that collection of 150 psalms:

- some psalms express profound sadness or even anger at life's injustice;
- some psalms recount the history of the Jewish people;
- some plead for God's intervention amid life's difficulties;
- some honor the "king" which could mean Israel's king or God as ruler of all;
- and there are many psalms that try to put into words (and music) the pure, instinctive, overwhelming, indescribable, bubbling up, so-full-that-I'm-ready-to-burst joy that can fill our lives occasionally or frequently or much of the time.

And I believe that some people express their joy by putting pen to paper or brush to canvas or chisel to stone to create art. After today's service you're encouraged to make your way to the preschool wing. There you will see all manner of art created by three-, four-, and five-year-olds. They weren't laboring under a production quota or to satisfy the demands of wealthy patrons like some artists throughout history. The children were expressing the joy of making new shapes with materials, the joy of getting their fingers messy with glue and glitter and paint, the joy of fashioning dolphins or dinosaurs or boats or butterflies out of cotton swabs or paper plates or construction paper, the joy of using markers or crayons to add the details they thought necessary to complete their project. In later years our children may express their joy through the artistic media of textiles or video or metalwork.

And right here in this room some people express their joy through divine doodling. What about the rest of us? How might we express:

- the joy we feel because we know God;
- the joy we feel because we live our lives within God's love and forgiveness and patience and support;
- the joy we feel because Jesus leads us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us;

¹ 2 Samuel 6:14 Contemporary English Version "David, dressed in a linen priestly vest, danced with all his strength before the Lord."

² <https://www.cmuse.org/100-famous-and-inspirational-music-quotes/> accessed 4/26/2018

- the joy we feel because Jesus us reminds us to serve the least of these, our brothers and sisters?

How might we express our joy? I'd suggest we can do it by living our church's simple, concise mission statement which appears at the bottom of the back page of the bulletin: "*Praising God. Teaching Faith. Serving Others.*"

We express joy by **Praising God** through the joy of our friendship and fellowship, through our appreciation of the beauty of this place of worship, through the prayers and songs that stimulate our minds and move our hearts, through the peace and comfort and safety and encouragement we derive from this sacred hour in this sacred space.

We express joy by **Teaching Faith**.

- By your joyful gifts of money week by week you make possible the youth fellowship groups that inspired you by leading worship last Sunday.
- Your joyful gifts help make possible the confirmation program you'll see the fruits of next week.
- Your joyful gifts of money and time make possible our Sunday school program throughout the year.
- You teach faith by being models of respect and encouragement for our children who worship with us for part of the service each Sunday.
- You teach faith by being models of gratitude and respect and Godly-devotion in your families and workplaces and in other groups you're a part of.

So Praising God and Teaching Faith are ways we express our joy in knowing God.

And we express joy by **Serving Others**. Maybe you serve through charitable work you undertake in your community, through your workplace, through your alma mater. We certainly offer opportunities here, whether it's through:

- donations to the food pantry, or
- pitching in for our Trash & Treasure Sale, or
- helping cook or serve at our Community Meal next month, or
- doing that during our all-June-long "Month of Partnership" at North Church, or
- serving as leaders for our church (and in a few minutes you'll have the chance to show your appreciation by electing some people to serve as new church leaders for the years ahead).

And as our Vitality & Renewal Team is learning from you, we may be on the brink of discovering other opportunities for serving others that we haven't even imagined yet! So yes, we express our joy by Serving Others.

Though we may be tempted sometimes merely to trudge through our days thinking only of the tasks immediately before us, gathering for worship encourages us to "look up" – to lift our eyes heavenward to remember the goodness and generosity of God. When we remember that God is always with us no matter what we're going through, it's awfully hard not to discover even a small kernel of joy within us longing to be expressed. As one writer has said, "Whatever life gives to you, you can respond with joy. Joy is the happiness that does not depend on what happens. It is the grateful response to the opportunity that life offers you at this moment."³

So recognize and embrace and express the joy that is within you, for as we heard from Romans 15:13 "May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in [God], so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴

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³ Brother David Steindl-Rast, quoted in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* by Dalai Lama XIV, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Carlton Abrams. New York: Avery Publishing, 2016, 245.

⁴ Romans 15:13 Today's English Version