

Why Am I Here?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
September 15, 2019

- Psalm 116:5-14 (Good News Translation)
⁵The LORD is merciful and good; our God is compassionate.
⁶The LORD protects the helpless; when I was in danger, he saved me.
⁷Be confident, my heart, because the LORD has been good to me.
⁸The LORD saved me from death; he stopped my tears and kept me from defeat.
⁹And so I walk in the presence of the LORD in the world of the living.
¹⁰I kept on believing, even when I said, "I am completely crushed,"
¹¹even when I was afraid and said, "No one can be trusted."
¹²What can I offer the LORD for all his goodness to me?
¹³I will bring a wine offering to the LORD, to thank him for saving me.
¹⁴In the assembly of all his people I will give him what I have promised.
- 1Thessalonians 5:14-24 (Good News Translation) ¹⁴We urge you, our friends, to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵See that no one pays back wrong for wrong, but at all times make it your aim to do good to one another and to all people.
¹⁶Be joyful always, ¹⁷pray at all times, ¹⁸be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.
¹⁹Do not restrain the Holy Spirit; ²⁰do not despise inspired messages. ²¹Put all things to the test: keep what is good ²²and avoid every kind of evil.
²³May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being – spirit, soul, and body – free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We're in this church to lift up God, to be lifted up by God, and to lift up others.

Monday was my first day back in the office after being gone for the past three months. At lunch on Monday I ran into someone from this church. He told me he was looking forward to hearing about my experiences from the sabbatical. I assured him that that would happen, but it wasn't all going to happen on my first Sunday back in the pulpit. I'm reminded of a farmer explaining to a city slicker that a wagonload of manure is more effective if it's spread around rather than when the whole load is dropped all at once.

So Mary and I had some marvelous, unique, even exotic experiences over the past three months, due to the privilege of being granted a sabbatical period by the congregation and the Session, and due to the generous grant from the Lilly Endowment's National Clergy Renewal Program. In the weeks and months ahead you will have the opportunity to see pictures and hear stories of the diverse settings we found ourselves in, memorable people we encountered, experiences that one simply cannot experience in suburban Cleveland Ohio.

Not that I am surprised by it, but I have heard again and again how insightful and inspiring this church's worship life was this summer because of you: preachers from the pews stepping forward to share their thoughts and passions and beliefs and perspectives. In the weeks ahead I look forward to experiencing what you all enjoyed as I go to the church's website and listen to each of those messages.

Yes, this church did just fine without me... which does prompt me to ask the question, "Why am I here?" Well, I missed you. I missed all this. To be honest, it took the first few weeks

of the sabbatical to mentally separate from this place. And for the last two weeks of the sabbatical I found myself thinking more and more about getting back to work and reconnecting with you. But it was refreshing and restorative to enjoy that substantial break from the responsibilities of this position I'm privileged to enjoy.

But again I'll ask, "Why am I *here*?" In fact, I'm aware of at least two unusual options elsewhere that are happening this very day that I would have found interesting to check out.

Two Sundays ago we were at Salem Presbyterian Church in the tiny village of Venedocia in western Ohio's Van Wert County where U.S. Route 30 crosses the state line into Indiana. I saw an announcement in their bulletin that today, September 15, is their annual "Drive Your Tractor to Church" Sunday. There will be well over a dozen tractors there today, I'm told. Most are their everyday machines; I understand that a few bring out their prized, restored antique tractors. I heard a member say that in the blistering heat of last year's event, so-and-so had brought his enormous field machine because its cab is air-conditioned, but his home and the church aren't. Despite that fascinating option, I chose to be here rather than at "Drive Your Tractor to Church" Sunday.

I also could have been at Kirkridge Presbyterian Church in Grand Blanc, Michigan about an hour north of Detroit. That's the church Mary and I joined when we were newlyweds. Just down the road from Kirkridge Church is Warwick Hills Country Club. Warwick Hills used to be the site of the Buick Open and now hosts a PGA Tour Champions event called the Ally Challenge, happening this weekend. And for the extended weekend – including Sunday morning – Kirkridge Presbyterian Church provides parking and shuttle services to spectators. At this very hour they're holding Sunday school as usual, but today's worship service is cancelled as they use their providentially located parking lot to raise money for mission.

I could have been there, waving at traffic with bright orange flags or driving shuttle vans to the course. But I'm here. Why? And why are *you* here? There are many possible reasons: maybe life is overwhelming right now and you hope – you pray! – for a spiritual encounter with a Power greater than you, relieving you of the anxiety of having to be in charge, of having to be good at everything.

Why are you here? Maybe you're carrying a burden of guilt and you are looking for a place where you can silently lay down that weight and seek forgiveness from the one you hurt, forgiveness from the all-knowing God who balances justice and mercy, even seeking forgiveness from yourself for having been so selfish or foolish or impulsive.

Maybe what drew you here today is the chance to make music. Yes, we *hear* so much music throughout the day but rarely get the chance to be part of it, whether singing from the pew or as part of a choir or simply absorbing it as it swirls around you.

Perhaps you came today because you hunger for greater awareness of Holy Scripture or insight into the *whats* and *hows* and *whens* and *whys* of God – what we often refer to by the fancy word "theology." Maybe you came because you want to learn, to grow.

I imagine that many of you are here because the social aspect of a church community buoys you. I read in the Journal of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary that the oldest religious site in the world, the 11,000-year-old Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, was also a place where nomadic tribes would gather for a kind of camp meeting or religious festival. The archaeologist who worked on the site speculates that civilization may have, in fact, arisen from gatherings like this. Since the dawn of history, humans have known that when you gather large groups together for intense experiences around their highest ideals – festivals, camp meetings, revivals, even political rallies – new possibilities emerge. As Brené Brown writes

in *Braving the Wilderness* (2017), large collective gatherings are “more than just people coming together to distract themselves from life... instead they are an opportunity to feel connected to something bigger than oneself; an opportunity to feel joy, social connection, meaning, and peace.”¹

No, the social aspect of this gathering is nothing to sneeze at. Maybe you get enjoyment from interacting with people you’ve grown close to because you met at this church... so much enjoyment that it might almost seem like a guilty pleasure. But don’t feel guilty; feel generous. Expand your circle. Say “hi” to a face that’s familiar which belongs to a person who isn’t; who knows if she or he might be another dear friend in the making.

Why are you here today?

- Are you one of those who is nursing a deep, invisible hurt: feelings of grief stop you in your tracks sometimes, even though some around you are telling you that you should be over it by now?
- Or feeling alone, ignored, forgotten, even though your daily life has you surrounded by people?
- Or feeling anxious about potential changes that may be coming your way?
- Or general nervousness about uncertainties in the world?

If that’s you, guess what? You’re not alone. Others in this very room are here today seeking healing of mind and spirit because life hurts so much right now.

Or maybe this is why you’re here: you’re here because this one hour each week is an incomparable refuge from the forty-plus hours on the job, or the thirty-plus hours that the television is blaring in the background, or the hours spent behind the wheel getting to work or shuttling kids to rehearsal and practice, or going over to take care of your parents at the end of your long day.

Take all those reasons and more, and boil ‘em down, and here’s why I think we’re here: to lift up God, to be lifted up by God, and to lift up others.

One of the purposes of psalms in the Bible is to sing God’s praises, to extol God’s goodness, to “lift up” God’s greatness and justice and compassion and generosity. This is a natural response to having been on the receiving end of God’s gracious action, of “being lifted up” by God out of threatening, frightful circumstances. Psalm 116 presents a person’s testimony of God’s grace, of being “lifted up” by God. Incidentally, despite the psalm’s title in our pew Bible, I think the speaker is a woman, not a man because later in the psalm she aspires to serve God just as her *mother* (not father) did. (Read Psalm 116 on your own with a woman in mind; it’s even more powerful.) Especially in those opening verses in today’s selection from Psalm 116 the speaker explains how God “lifted her up”:

⁵The Lord is merciful and good; our God is compassionate.

⁶The Lord protects the helpless; when I was in danger, he saved me.

⁷Be confident, my heart, because the Lord has been good to me.

⁸The Lord saved me from death; he stopped my tears and kept me from defeat.

⁹And so I walk in the presence of the Lord in the world of the living.

¹⁰I kept on believing, even when I said, “I am completely crushed,”

¹¹even when I was afraid and said, “No one can be trusted.”

Then the speaker in the psalm wonders what to do next. She decides to extol or “lift up” God for all God has done by making an offering of gratitude “in the assembly of all [God’s]

¹ “New Twist on an Old Story” by Mike Clawson in *Austin Seminary Windows*, Summer/Fall 2019 Vol. 134, No. 3, p. 12

people.”² In front of friends, neighbors, strangers she testifies to God’s power and goodness. Having been “lifted up” she praises or “lifts up” the name of God in the hope that others, too, will see that God longs to bless them by “lifting them up,” empowering them to endure and survive life’s disappointments and struggles.

In the New Testament’s 1st Letter to the Thessalonians we heard Paul suggest a strategy for the Christian community to “lift up” those around them – those in their own families, their friends and neighbors, even strangers in the community. I like how Paul starts out acknowledging that showing Christ-like love is not simply being a push-over. Remember those familiar instructions?

¹⁴We urge you, our friends, to warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵See that no one pays back wrong for wrong, but at all times make it your aim to do good to one another and to all people. ¹⁶Be joyful always, ¹⁷pray at all times, ¹⁸be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.³

Paul’s instructions are clear, but our task is hard: “...at all times make it your aim to do good to one another and to all people”? “Be joyful always”? “Be thankful in all circumstances”? It’s great when God lifts us up; it’s an honorable thing when we remember to lift up our reverence for God before others. But “lifting up others” is hard work. That’s not an effort that many of us can sustain on our own. We need Jesus Christ to model forgiveness and patience. We need the grace of God’s Holy Spirit to strive to love generously and unconditionally. We need each other for the fellowship and encouragement that keeps us going “for Christ’s sake.”

It begins with humility. As skilled and generous and smart and capable as we may be, first we need to pause, to be pensive, to pray for humility. With a humble mindset we recognize that it’s God at work in us that empowers us to lift others up:

to bolster in times of discouragement;
to keep hope alive when despair swirls all around;
to speak the truth in a spirit of love when someone is being unrealistic.

From a place of humble self-awareness we are reminded that all we are and all we have and all we hope for is because of God. Our ability to lift up others is possible because we’ve known and seen and been blessed by God graciously lifting us up to guide and guard our way.

I believe that’s why you’re here. I know that’s why I’m here, and I’m so glad to be back here.

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² Psalm 116:13-16 Good News Translation

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18 (Good News Translation)