

“Gratitude, Joy, and belonging”

- I remember like it was yesterday the first time as an adult I felt like I belonged to a church
 - Do you remember that moment for yourself? Was it here, somewhere else?
 - Many of you already know my story by now, but there are quite a few of you who are new, and online, who have not heard them!
 - (I’m turning into that family member who tells the same stories at all of the family gatherings)
 - I grew up Baptist. I remember during my teenage years, realizing that the Baptist faith that had been given to me in my youth
 - No longer worked the more I became an adult.
 - Lots of things, but a conservative, literal interpretation of an error-free Bible was at the top of that list...
 - There just had to be more to it than that
 - And in college it was truly a time of exploration and deconstruction, down to the very basics of, “I know there is God, but know nothing more”...
 - To finding God in mediation, and eventually through the rituals and worship of the Episcopal church
 - And of course, the church family we had found at St. Peter’s in Conway, AR
 - I loved the diversity and acceptance that was within the Adult Education class as we discussed the lectionary together
 - I could actually ask questions, disagree without being forced into exile from the community
 - And goodness there was a fantastic Foyers dinner group
 - We passed around pints of ice cream and holding our own spoons, ate right out of the carton!
 - As Katy and I entered this congregation as an engaged couple in college, I remember two things:
 - I remember when I gave my first check in the offering plate...
 - And when I decided to starting drinking out of the common cup

- As an aside, Bishop Paula has given permission now for churches to decide on their own when the common cup comes back...
- And the parish leadership and I are trying to figure that out for St. Michael's this year
- I put a survey in the Sword- let me know what you think about it
- Bringing back this Anglican symbol of unity is important, but we are not going to rush it
- These two moments in my own life- giving and partaking- were bricks in the foundation to who I am today,
 - To being a priest, to committing my life to serving this church
- In retrospect, these two events, accepting the cup and giving my pledge, were facets of the same thing
- It was belonging.
- I knew I was a member of that parish, and an Episcopalian, when I had drank that wine out of that chalice- they were my family now
 - After all, I didn't drink after just anyone... Only those closest to me
- And when I gave of my own money, what little we had at the time, to enable this parish to do its work that God was doing through it
- I belonged, and I was grateful, and it brought joy.
- Today's sermon is that one sermon a year when, as rector, I am tasked with talking about giving and supporting the parish
 - There's a lot of ground to cover today, but stay with me.
 - We have kicked off the stewardship program as of last week, we have had and will have parishioners talk of their love and belonging and giving
 - And our guest speaker will join us at the end of the month to preach and be a part of our luncheon following the service
 - You all know that St. Michael's does not have an endowment or permanent fund... yet
 - That something like 90% of our budget's income is based on pledges and offering plate giving
 - Some years we get good interest from investments, like last year
 - And some years we will not, like this year!
 - The preschool does contribute in a positive way, and comes in about like a generous pledge
 - But otherwise, it's you and me, we determine this parish's brick and mortar presence
 - We determine staffing, ministry budgets, pay the electric bill and snow removal, the live stream costs, the building repairs
 - Those in this room, and those online

- We actually have a significant number of online views these days: so to you all who are watching live, or watching this later in the day today
 - We are glad you are with us, and wish God's blessing on you
- St. Michael's, like every parish, is in the middle of some more huge changes, the kind that will be felt for the next 75 years
- These are the aftershocks of COVID and cultural influences and changes beyond us, but that directly affect us
- Our in person attendance is down, and down like every other parish in our deanery and beyond
- A combination of people moving, getting out of the habit of attending, becoming less invested during COVID
- And frankly, perhaps leaving because of conflict or out of frustration, or grief over what the parish once was
- And yet, looking out at this parish, feeling the joy that you all are bringing, St. Michael's has in fact come through this better than most
- We are about the only parish in the deanery with children and youth in it- and children's ministry is a bright spot here
- There are more than a few of you who are newer to the parish- and to whom my stories and jokes are also new!
- That's right, newcomers and new members! I am glad you're here
- And I am asking you all to come together to not just continue St. Michael's today and its present ministries and work
- But to give to its future, its possibility
- We will have the opportunity to pledge on October 30 in the service, as we have in years past.
- Go head and start thinking about it.
- As I look back on my own life, giving is but a symptom of the other things.
 - Gratitude, joy, and belonging all bear the fruit of giving, and volunteering, and attending
 - Not too long ago, I channeled Bishop Budde and talked about joy
 - I asked you to bring your joy, to give your joy, and you did
 - The spirit in this place has lifted me out of my day to day frustration and fear more than once.
 - I have been thinking about joy more, in part thanks to a question from a parishioner who asked me, "what is joy?"
 - I started with a little research.
 - I found a great article on Psychology Today written by Dr. Pamela King¹

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/202007/what-is-joy-and-what-does-it-say-about-us>

- She said that joy is “the enduring and underlying sense of something that is deeper than the emotion of happiness”
- It is more complex than just an emotion
- It can be cultivated, practiced, and and be made into a habit
- In her study, there are three areas that inform joy: growing in authenticity and living into your strengths
- Growing in depth of relationships and contributing to others
- Living more aligned with one’s ethical and spiritual ideals.
- When we do these things, we begin to grow and create a sense of joy in the deepest part of our lives
- Now as a Christian and Episcopalian, immediately I thought to myself- that is exactly what started when I first joined that church
- That is what church is!
- I found a place where I could be me, with my strengths, weaknesses, successes and mistakes
- I found a place where I could grow in depth in relationships with others that were different from me, and where I could contribute to others
- And where my spiritual ideals were lived out
- Because I believe God has created us for just this purpose, and it is the church that can fulfill and challenges us in these areas when we let it
- Doing these things that are right here in this room can create the deep and abiding sense of joy that undergirds the emotions of the moment
- And we can bring it, and share it, and even pledge it
- Then I found a great article by Brene Brown ² that talked about the relationship between joy and gratitude
- Kay Lewis preached on this just last week, and told us about her journal and how it sustained her during one of the hardest years of her life
- And Brene Brown says that what she has found was a bit counter-intuitive, she thought that if you are joyful, you should be grateful
- But that was not it at all
- Instead, it is in practicing gratitude that we invite joy in our lives.
- And not just the “attitude of gratitude”, or the feeling of gratitude... but the action of gratitude.
- It’s the prayer journal listing the things for which we are grateful, it’s saying it out loud, it’s sharing at a family dinner
- It is gratitude that is tangible...

² <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/>

- And turns out that, as a Jesuit priest once said, “It’s not joy that makes us grateful, it’s gratitude that makes us joyful.”³
- And do you know why I started sharing the cup and giving my pledge so many years ago?
- Because I belonged. And I was grateful. And I made it my tangible practice,
- And I have reaped much joy from what I stumbled into 22 years ago in that little Episcopal Church
- And I was able to support its brick and mortar, its ministries, its staff- its very existence, as I have each church since then
- Sometimes it takes persistence- stubbornness really- to create the environment in which joy grows and then persists
- Our readings, and I’m just going to talk briefly about them, so don’t worry!
- Our readings beg us to be persistent- to be stubborn- to hang in there when it gets hard, when there is too much change and too much transition
- The author of Second Timothy, maybe Paul and maybe someone who learned from Paul
- This author writes, “be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable,” and “have patience”
- “...endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”
- Jesus teaches to pray persistently even when we feel the door remains closed, when the prayer does not get past the ceiling
- Keep knocking
- Remember: because prayer changes us first and foremost.
- Doing it persistently change us the easiest
- More to the point, having our hearts persistently and consistently centered in the presence of God, which is what prayer is,
- Can make a radical difference in our lives and this world.
- Especially prayer of gratitude, and of longing for God’s joy in being the person and people God has created us to be.
- Now as your rector, I am asking you to be a part of this giving campaign this year, to pray and think deeply about your part in this parish
- October 30! We will have lunches and pledges
- We all have more than a 90% stake in what that budget is able to do, and what possibilities it creates! You’re empowered!

³ <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/>

- But much more than the bricks, mortar, and dollars,
- The spiritual aspects of persistent giving to a place like this is one way in which we can grow joy
- I am inviting you into a tangible practice of gratitude, that can build a joy in your life
- To join in and belong, by bringing your authentic self, by contributing to others, and certainly where our spiritual lives are nourished
- Because there is no way to come to this altar and to leave without having met God.
- That's the promise in the sacrament- God is in this bread and wine and there's nothing we can do to stop it- except stay away
- This fall as we collectively come together to be a church, to be grateful, to be joyful
 - And to be the people and parish God is calling us to be
 - I hope you find that a persistent pledge is among the ways you will do that.
 - Because this place is worth it.
 - Sometimes church can be messy, there can be conflict, disagreement, hurt feelings- church can challenge us like few other places can
 - And yet as Christians Jesus taught that when two or three are gathered, God is right there in the messiness of our humanity
 - And God is certainly right here in this place
 - I invite you to go deeper and become even more a part of this community this year
 - And to support this parish in its work within and without
 - Do it with gratitude, joy and belonging.

Amen.