

“God-Inspired Joy”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Some of you know, some of you perhaps don't know, and some of you perhaps have forgotten that, in the city of Greensboro, there are at least three (and in the county of Guilford and surrounding areas there are others) primary United Church of Christ congregations. Every one of these three congregations has a pastor who is really “off the hook” and “out of the box” and “wild and crazy”. St. Stephen United Church of Christ has the Reverend Dr. Eric Griffin. St. Stephens is primarily an African-American church. It has a long, long history of great service to the city of Greensboro. It was very active in the Civil War Movement, etc. That is a wild bunch of people over there, and that Rev. Dr. Eric Griffin is crazy.

Congregational United Church of Christ is about a mile from here. That is a crazy church with the Rev. Julie Peeples, and if you want to keep tabs on Julie Peeples, just get a subscription to the newspaper. She is always in the newspaper, speaking out for causes and doing all sorts of good stuff in the city of Greensboro. She is “off the hook”.

Peace United Church of Christ has a pastor, too. He is totally normal and regular, but there is a rumor going around about this pastor of Peace United Church of Christ that he's actually kind of nutty and crazy. The rumor most recently was that he was in Chicago at a “Grateful Dead” concert just last week. I want to tell you that is not true. I was at THREE “Grateful Dead” concerts last week.

The Grateful Dead, some of you know, is a rock band that came out of the 1960s. They celebrated their 50th anniversary up in Chicago last week. They celebrated it by doing their final three concerts ever. Like so many bands that are going around this summer including the Rolling Stones, The Who, Paul McCartney, all of these bands that really got their beginnings in the 1960s are now getting older and are about ready to hang it up, but some of them are trying to go out with a little bit of style and grace. The “Grateful Dead” (and there are only four of the original members left in the “Grateful Dead” band) tried to do this and did it very well in Chicago.

These concerts were in Soldier Field. There were 80,000 people packed into that football stadium. One of the curses and blessings of being a pastor is that I can hardly do anything without thinking theologically about it. So, I was standing there (and my tickets with my friends were in the 400, upper, upper deck) during the end of the third night, which was really the culmination of the whole shebang, and I started thinking theologically: What in the world is going on here? Why is this such an event? Why is this type of event such an attraction to young and old people?

This event (not unlike other events, other bands and other mass culture activities) has some pieces to it that speak, in a sense, to church. For instance, at these particular concerts (and many concerts that you go to today), there is a mission component. So, at the farewell concerts in Chicago, there were 17 tents called “Participation Row” which were 17 different non-profit groups set up to help educate the people who had come to the concert, to raise money for different public programs like Habitat for Humanity. All kinds of different environmental groups were there and so forth, so there was this sort of mission component to this mass culture event. If you go to concerts, at most concerts today, especially concert festivals, there is always this non-profit presence for people to engage in activities that build up the local community or the world, depending on its cause, so I was thinking about this. This event actually has a mission component which is wonderful. This event I was at, like many other events of this nature, had a communal event. There was a communion going on. Now, this is not a communion of bread and wine like we do in our Christian ritual of communion, but there is this communion of people coming together and finding joy by coming together.

At a "Grateful Dead" concert or any concert you might go to, the people who go to those know all the hymns, so everyone is singing along at a communal moment, singing "Truckin'" or "Touch of Gray" or whatever the song is that means something to them. Many, many times during those three nights you could hear a chorus of 80,000 people singing along word for word with the band, so there was this communal peace to this popular cultural event of singing. They have their own hymns there.

There was, the final night, a real push for love. The last song of the night was a song called "Not Fade Away". It is a very popular Chuck Berry type of tune. The refrain of that song is "Love that is real will not fade away. Love that is real will not fade away". Everybody was chanting this and walking out of the stadium, continuing to sing, chant and clap with this "Love that is real will not fade away". At the end, when the band was saying goodbye and doing their bows, the drummer, whose name is Mickey Hart, came up to microphone and said "This feeling that we have here tonight, take it out.. take it to your homes. Share it, and let's heal the earth. Let's heal this planet", so there was something like a benediction on the night. I just kept sitting there thinking "This whole thing is a religious event". Now, it was not a religion, but it had the components of a religious event.

There is a theologian and sociology expert by the name of Tex Sample. Some of you may know, and John Syster may know, that Tex Sample has done a lot of work in pop culture and how pop cultural events are now starting to speak to people's religious needs. One of his most famous books is called "White Soul: Country Music, the Church and Working Class Americans", and he's done some wonderful work on how people are finding meaning through country music. Here is one expression of this. He writes "Country music gives voice to an economically battered subculture of hard-living and hard-working people who find self-expression in the music of honkytonks and heartache. It celebrates the wild side of life as a form of populous anarchism and escapism".

What Tex Sample has been able to say is that the church is now in competition with pop culture because pop culture is creating events and forces that speak to people's needs for community, for engagement with the community, for mission activities like nonprofits through being around like-minded people. All of that speaks to, and challenges, the church in our day and time.

The question for us is, can the church compete with that because I can tell you that, up at the Chicago concert and at "U2" which was another big concert band that was in Chicago a couple of nights before, people are finding meaning and some kind of transformation through those experiences. Of course, if you go to a rock concert today, it is not the crowd together, it's not just the sound of the music (which, of course, is quite loud), but it is the light show, images and all kinds of stuff. It is all very high tech, and people really are consumed by that presentation.

The question for me and you this morning is, can the church compete with that and, if we can, how might we do that? I want to go into, very briefly, this whole story of King David and the Ark of the Covenant. This is a really deep Israelite story about the early faith of Israel and, if you didn't pick up on it in both of those readings, it was sort of a festive moment. David and the other Israelites were dancing and singing. They had instruments and were just carrying on out of pure joy. The Ark of the Covenant is basically a movable box, if you will, that the Israelites carried with them as they journeyed through the wilderness and as they journeyed towards Jerusalem. This story is about the Ark of the Covenant coming into Jerusalem where it would find a place in the Temple. At first it was a movable, festive sort of thing that they kept in a tent. Once Jerusalem got situated and the Temple was built, the Ark of the Covenant would end up being permanent there, but we're not at that point in this text. This is about a movable piece of the Ark of the Covenant.

In this box, which they called the Ark of the Covenant, there is, allegedly, the Ten Commandments. The tablets of God are allegedly in the box. There is allegedly manna in the box and some trinkets and relics of the Israelite faith in this box, but the three primary meanings of the Ark of the Covenant is what this is all about. What had them so excited about this box that probably 4, 6 or 8 Israelites carried as they marched into the wilderness as they had battles along the way? What was it about this Ark of the Covenant?

There were three main things that this Ark of the Covenant meant to the Israelites and were the source of their joy. The first thing was the Ark of the Covenant celebrated, and was symbolic of, tribal unity. With that Ark of the Covenant in front of them, it was sort of the rallying point that promoted this idea and made them all feel like they were part of this special community. It was unity. We are one body and we sort of focus around this Ark of the Covenant. We let it lead before us, and it gives us a sense of identity. There was a unity that the Ark of the Covenant symbolized—unity, community, people gathered. This is what it symbolized.

Secondly, it symbolized, of course, that God, Yahweh, was present with the Israelites. This is where they sensed and believed that Yahweh was sort of embodied in this Ark, so in there, if you will, God's presence, Yahweh, was there and they could celebrate by going to the Ark and saying that God is with us and we are in unity. We are a community that is strong and God marches along with us, so there was a sense that, yes, our God is leading the way and is with us.

Then, of course, with the idea that the tablets were in this Ark of the Covenant, the Ten Commandments and perhaps other laws were embodied in this, there was the idea that the law and the Covenant were part of our whole being. In other words, God shows us how to live, and God gives us work to do based on these Ten Commandments, so we are a community that is totally together in unity. We are celebrating and having this moment of ecstasy because God is with us, and God is showing us the way, through the laws and the Ten Commandments, to build this new community of faith and shows us how we are to live, and it's going to be fantastic. So, we are together, God is with us, we have the law to guide us, and this is how we shall live. It is a time of joy, dancing and music.

The last scripture from 2 Samuel, actually Verse 5, says "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals". They were having a festival because they were so filled with the reality that God was with them and they were a unified body. They were called to build up His kingdom.

We, as Peace Church, are starting to move forward. Dawnings Initiative, which I've been talking about, and which was in the Peace Press a month ago, this visioning process, will start to take shape in August. We will begin on August 16 with our Dawnings Initiative team going on a retreat and then coming back to all of you to share some of the ideas and to work on that vision. The promise of this Dawnings Initiative is that it will lead us to discover again what is in our faith that can make us leap for joy, what is in our faith that gets us so excited that we cannot contain it and we want to invite everyone in, and what is it that God is calling us to do to be part of healing this world.

In recent history, the Christian church has gotten all caught up in the battle over morals, who is in, who is out, what is right, what is wrong, believe this doctrine and not that doctrine. In the process of this haggling over all that minutia of what's right and what's wrong, who is in and who is out, we have lost the joy of the Christian faith. We have forgotten that God is actually in the midst of everything that we do. That is what we need to regain. We need to regain the joy of this faith of ours which is 2000 years old, re-embrace this joy of our faith, remember again that God has blessed us. We are all such blessed people. It is a joy to come here on Sunday mornings and see people, smiles, laughter, having fun, rejoicing that God is in our midst. We need to put that back in our hearts and take it out and say "Man, we've got something going on here," so that we can dance like David was dancing, rejoicing that God is with us and that we are unified people, and we have been called to do something great. I am very much encouraged, and have a deep faith, that the Dawnings Initiative, which is going to engage in all of us, will reveal that God is not only in our midst but that God has something very special, powerful and joyful for us to do and that the church will grow.

At the end of the story from scripture this morning, David celebrates the coming of the Ark of the Covenant with one event. He distributes food. Everyone there gets food. Again, it is that issue of food, that we are going to have a feast and there is going to be plenty for everyone and we're going to imbibe that food, imbibe that drink, imbibe the fellowship, and have a great time because we can say that God

is with us, and that table, like the communion table, is always open. This is an open-ended party, and God has invited us to be at that table to share, to celebrate and to give thanks, so we look forward to that process, knowing that God is in our midst, that we are unified as a people and that God is calling us forward to a new day and that we can dance with joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.