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Date: March 13, 2022
Sermon: "Still Crazy After All These Years!"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture Litany for Pastoral Ministry

Leader: Rise up, and walk.

Congregation: Walk the extra mile

Leader: Follow me.

Congregation: Turn the other cheek.

Leader: Do not worry about tomorrow.

Congregation: *Do not be afraid.*

Together: *As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the Work of an evangelist; carry out your ministry fully.
(2 Timothy 4:5)*

Sermon "Still Crazy After All These Years" **David Johnson Rowe**

The Bible tells us in Luke 4:16 that "Jesus went to the synagogue, as was his custom." "As was his custom." Going to church was second nature for Jesus. It was the natural order of things. He was regular about it, "as was his custom."

He went to his local synagogue on a regular basis for teaching and learning; and he went to the big Temple in Jerusalem for rituals and traditions. He sang the hymns, he knew his Bible, he loved to pray. Church life was his custom.

But it's also true that in the Bible, church life can be anywhere. So we see people worshiping on a riverbank, in the marketplace, in a prison cell, on the battlefield, and in the middle of nowhere.

In fact, Jesus put it simply: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, I'm there." Bingo! That's church, Jesus promises. That's the heartbeat of church, really, the community of being together, and the communion of being with God while being together.

And if we've learned one lesson from Covid about church life, it's how much we yearn for that community and communion, how much we want to be together.

So I am incredibly blessed. I've spent my whole life in church. Imagine loving baseball and spending your whole life working at Yankee Stadium. Imagine loving books and spending your whole life in a library. For me, I'm steeped in church.

My first childhood memory was lying in the back pew in my father's church in Lynn, Massachusetts. I was about a year and a half old. My first kiss was in church. And the story gets better . . . or worse.

About 20 years after that kiss, I was a pastor of a church about three miles away from that first kiss, and one Sunday morning who walks into that church but that girl! She gives me a big kiss after the benediction and announces to the whole church, "He was the best kisser in Queens."

I don't know if that helped or hurt my career. But it is true that throughout my life, most of my "aha," "Eureka," "Holy cow!" moments took place in those sacred spaces of church.

My Sunday School teacher called me this week. Yes, my Sunday School teacher from the 1950s. I had two teachers back in the day. One was a Roller Derby queen, and one was a Rockette. You can see I had a good childhood.

The wonderful lady who called me was the Rockette, and she started reminiscing. "Remember when I took the whole Sunday School to Manhattan to see "The Ten Commandments"? She asked, laughing. "Then we went over to St. Patrick's Cathedral, and you got us kicked out by the nuns for running up to the high altar and lighting 100 candles! Then we went to the Horn & Hardart Automat for dinner! And you became a pastor!"

This is not a very profound sermon today, forgive me. A bunch of tidbits loosely tied together with a Bible verse or two. All to say I have loved every minute of being immersed in church.

One of the Psalms says, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'" You can put that on my headstone. I'm glad that my life is church.

Becoming a pastor is a multistep process. In my case, first you scare the daylights out of everybody as a horrible teenager, then God scares the daylights out of you (a young adult), so you decide to be a minister. Then you go to seminary for three years to study things you've never heard about; and then you try to convince churches to pay you to do what you have no idea how to do.

That's the path that ends with me here, with you, 56 years after God slapped me around to see if I was listening. Let's call it what it was: I was converted. "Converted" is a fancy word for "changed" and, Lord have mercy, I was in need of change.

St. Paul famously called himself "chief among sinners." So "chief among sinners" means being the best at being the worst. That's Paul and I. We both knew how far we'd fallen *and* how far we've come, thank God.

Which makes it all the more astounding to get up every morning and be a pastor. On the best days it is joy beyond compare. On the worst days it is a precious honor to be invited into your lives.

I mentioned I had to go to seminary. Nine years at three great seminaries that pushed me hard; made me think hard—about God, about you, about me, about church.

But my real seminary was my father, and I saw him doing his work as a pastor my whole life. Years ago, before coming here, I wrote a book about work, and my prime example was my father. He believed in work. He believed in getting up early, doing your best, going to bed at the end of the day; and tomorrow, get up earlier, do your work even better. And he did the work of church pastor for 70 years. Until he was 86.

I've always said, "If you like what I do as a pastor, I learned it from my father. And what you don't like, I learned on my own. The thing about my father was there was no line between what was his work as a pastor and what was everything else. It all blended together. Everything was ministry. Everything was church. Everywhere was church. Everyone was part of his church. Everyone.

So he created sports empires, empires for boys and girls. When rock 'n' roll was young, those young rock 'n' rollers practiced and performed in the church. When a cross got burned in the neighborhood, he put out the flames. When folks were out of work, he fed them. When there was a subway strike, he got up at 4 AM, drove a carload of people to work in Manhattan, three or four round trips each day, and brought them home after work.

Back when Protestants and Catholics told each other they were going to hell, and Christians and Jews were never together, and nobody had even heard of Muslims, my father and the local priest and nuns hosted living room dialogues in people's, well, living rooms.

And he and the Rabbi played handball together, studied the Bible together, and held worship services together. And he was working with Muslims before most people even knew there were Muslims around.

And, yes, he did the obvious pastor stuff, preaching, teaching, baptizing, visiting in the hospitals, and . . . marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It's all what it meant to be a pastor. And his father was the same kind of pastor, his brother was the same kind of pastor. Not to get highfalutin about it, but it's all patterned after Jesus's ministry, who I don't think ever said, "Don't call me; it's my day off." Or, "That's not really in my job description."

Which is why Jesus—well, look at his job description—why he fed the hungry, he touched the lepers, he stopped the demons, he met with the enemy, he told stories, he toyed with the devil, he loved kids, helped soldiers, calmed storms. And he went to funerals and weddings, he preached, he taught, he visited. All church stuff, by my definition.

So, when I decided to become a pastor, those were my role models: Jesus and my father. Which may sound arrogant, but why not aim for the best? When I played baseball, I aimed to be Ted Williams.

I started to be a pastor at the right time: churches were still a big deal. Clergy were still a big deal. I started out in ministry in Brooklyn; five churches hired me to develop a summer youth ministry that kept kids off the streets. It was 1968. In those days, the City would do anything I asked; the answer was always, "Yes, Father."

If I wanted to take 100 kids to Shea Stadium for a Mets game, the City provided buses, paid for the tickets. When I began a coffeehouse ministry, I wouldn't let drugs or guns in the church, so I told the police that I would hold on to the drugs and guns but that some kids might stash them up in the tree branches near the church. So I told the police, "Don't bother it, O.K.?" "Yes, Father." "And don't frisk me, O.K.?" "Yes, Father."

In those days, you could get a big laminated sign that said "CLERGY" on it and put it in the front car window visor all over New York City. I could park anywhere; double-park all over New York City—no problem, never got a ticket.

Then there was the 10 percent deal. Anywhere you went, anything you bought, 10 percent off, clergy discount, "just for you, Father." Clothing, restaurants, you name it. So, equipped with all these perks, and with my father and Jesus as role models, I got to work as a pastor.

And as I count my blessings, #1 is I've been incredibly blessed by the churches that hired me. In all my years, they, you have never said "No" to anything I tried. I'm not saying you didn't scoff or gasp or roll your eyes. But I've been given every opportunity to try, to fail, and therefore to learn.

At one church they wanted to add a "contemporary" church service at 8 AM in the chapel. "Come as you are," I told everybody, and they did! PJs, bathrobes, and carrying their breakfast! I put a record player on the altar because rock 'n' roll records were the music. I served beer and pretzels for Communion. One Sunday I wrote a play about Creation, and I played the snake, dressed in green from head to toe. I slithered up the aisle on my belly to tempt Eve. One Easter, I walked to the front of my packed church and the Ramones were sitting in the front row! *The Ramones*, the "Kings of Punk Rock"!

I served wine in a Baptist church—that didn't go well; hosted traveling Christian theater groups—they were terrible; had bake sales for every cause under the sun (people liked that); beat back attempts to put the church on the gold standard *and* to kick out the Girl Scouts; preached a sermon on "Streaking for Christ!" Any of you old enough to remember "streaking"? If not, never mind. You don't want to know, but I preached favorably about it.

I've done trendy, radical, traditional, avant-garde. I've turned the pulpit over to journalists, TV stars, athletes, movies, and missionaries from every corner of the world.

I had a wedding at Tavern on the Green, where the groom never showed up, and the bride said, "It's paid for, let's eat!" I've done a funeral where nobody showed up, but there were 50 limousines lined up, and on each passenger-side window was a piece of paper listing all the people who paid for the limo.

I've blessed motorcycles, turtles, houses. I've washed the feet of soldiers going off to war. I preached against war, for war, against casinos; I've sung in the pulpit, and acted, but refuse to dance. We've had retreats and revivals. We've used every trick in the book, every idea you could imagine—all based on one premise: there's something that goes on within these four walls that folks could use, would like, might need, if we can get them in the door.

There's something about community, communion, prayer, quiet, music, faith, religion, heck, even preaching, that can take our souls to flight. It is mystical. It is mysterious. It is historic. It is personal. It is real.

When Covid hit, we shut down, mid-March of that year. And then, one Sunday in that late July, we had worship on the front lawn, a huge crowd, spread all across the three greens, sitting on blankets and lawn chairs and curbs. It was the greatest church service of my life.

That October we moved indoors, obeying all the safety rules, but we were back in here, cautious, fitful, wary at first. But since that Sunday 18 months ago, every single Sunday there's been someone in tears at the sheer joy of their first Sunday back in church. There is something that happens here.

I've always loved the Bible story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a much-hated, corrupt tax collector, cheating his own people, working for the enemy, a traitor working for the Roman occupier.

When he hears Jesus is coming to town, he heads to the main street, climbs up a tree, the better for him to see and, he hoped, not be seen. Well, you can't fool Jesus. Jesus spots him up in the tree, calls him by name, tells him to come down, and invited himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner. Halfway through dinner, Zacchaeus stands up, apologizes, and repays everyone he's hurt. End of story.

Very interesting. In the actual Bible story, there's a lot of intricate detail. That Zacchaeus is short, the tree is a sycamore tree, and Zacchaeus's profession is mentioned.

Jesus invites himself to dinner, and Zacchaeus offers to repay everyone a very specific 400 percent. Yet, there's no detail about Jesus berating the fellow, haranguing, or finger-pointing. There's no test about doctrine, no threat about hell, no membership rules.

If we accept the fact that most Bible stories try to get to the heart of the matter, the heart of the matter seems to be:

1. Zacchaeus is up a tree,
2. Jesus knows he's up a tree,
3. Jesus calls him by name, and
4. They spend time together.

In other words: Church.

After a 75-year lifetime in church, and a 54-year career in church, I can wrap it up simply.

At one time or another we're all up a tree, me included.

Up a tree.

Looking for something.

Wondering.

Even fearful.

But we don't want a fuss.

We don't want to be a bother or a burden.

Lots of times we don't want to be noticed.

We are in our own private Idaho or our own private hell, or our own private space.

But we want to believe that God notices, that God knows our name, that God would care to be with us.

Church is the embodiment of God, so it's our job to look up in the trees, see who's up there, know them, invite them down, and spend time together—even if we're up a tree.

Our new mental health ministry, "Shalom," it's about 75 people, and we're all up a tree. The mental health world is a world of chaos and hurt. We're up a tree together—but we're learning each other's name and story.

Ukraine is up a tree. That may be too small an analogy for the genocide taking place, but they are up a tree, hoping someone will notice, someone will remember their name, someone will invite them down and share their home. Be together.

A favorite story to close with? I've been at this job a long time. Lots of changes. No one calls me "Father" anymore. No more 10 percent discount.

Sunday morning is no longer sacred. We (the royal "we"), we clergy, we church, we religion, we religious people, we don't command the public square anymore. Nobody waits breathlessly for our leadership or our opinion.

So, on that level, yes, church has changed in my life. But the best of church, the best of us—lives on, still strong, still true.

Like this:

The day Covid began we opened wide the front door of this church, put a sign out front inviting anyone to come in for private prayer, individual worship, 6 AM to 8 PM. Today is the 730th straight day.

At the height of it, at the worst of it, I saw two bicycles out front, leaning up against the railing. Two teenagers had walked into our church. I stayed out of sight, not wanting to disturb them.

They went to the front, lit some candles, said a prayer, and one teenager said, "Do you think God knows we are here?"

"Sure," the other said, with the full-throated confidence of a teenager, "Sure . . . God knows we are here."

That's been the church's truth since Jesus saw Zacchaeus up a tree, called him by name, and said, "Let's get together."

That's church.

Let's conclude today's worship by singing together, "It Is Well with My Soul," No. 561"

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."*

*Refrain:
It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control:
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and has shed his own blood for my soul. Refrain*

*My sin oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
my sin, not in part, but the whole,
is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! Refrain*

*O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend;
even so, it is well with my soul. Refrain*