

“Joy in a Mutilated World”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

26 June 2022

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Text: Luke 15:1-10

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

- Luke 15:7

Prayer

**Holy and Living God,
May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of our hearts
Bring us closer to your Presence
And to your will for our lives. Amen.**

A few days ago, I received a light-hearted e-mail from one of our church members with a subject line that read “Light Duties.” The sender said jokingly that my sermon this week had better be a “doozy” since between my vacation in May and all the special services we had this month – Music Sunday, Confirmation and Family Ministries Sunday - I have not preached in a while.

I wish I could say with categorical and absolute conviction that this morning’s sermon will be a homiletic marvel, a blockbuster hit, but I am going to settle for a humble confession instead. As much as I love the spiritually and intellectually challenging discipline of preaching, I confess that I am grateful for the distance from the pulpit of the last few weeks. Preaching these days is not for the faint of heart.

After the horrifying shooting in Buffalo, New York, I stood at the lectern not to preach but to make a brief albeit important announcement. On behalf of the Social Justice Task Force, I invited our congregation to stand in solidarity with the grieving Black families whose loved ones were killed at a grocery store by donating toward a fund set up to help with funeral and burial expenses. A couple of weeks later, I was told that the families in our church were displeased with the words I used in the announcement while their kids were in the sanctuary. Words like guns and violence, shooting and death, racism and white supremacy.

Honestly, I was not surprised when the Director of Family Ministries relayed the sentiments of the parents in our pews. We want to protect our children from the raw reality of the world for as long as we can. We want to pretend that at least the church remains a place that is out of the reach of the consequences of our culture’s fascination with guns. I am surprised though that families in our congregation have not had the talk

about guns and violence and white supremacy with their children. We know that Black families cannot avoid having the talk, especially with their sons about racism. The talk is a matter of life-and-death to Black Americans. But families in our church have had the privilege of shielding their children from a talk that has become more necessary than ever before in this country's history. And churches like ours have to begin to speak about gun violence not only because our children are living with the specter of shootings in schools but also because so many of the white male perpetrators have been radicalized and planned their attacks without their parents' or family's knowledge and have come from communities not too different from small towns like Acton.

My father used to tell my brother and me when we were still fairly young to appreciate what he was saying that for a society to work well people have the civic and moral responsibility to be informed and do their best to make responsible choices for the sake of the common good. Dad often accused our neighbors who showed no interest in political and social issues of idiocy, which is how the ancient Athenians employed the word as well. "Idiot" was the political term in classical Greek that described those individuals who believed that their day-to-day life was somehow unaffected by state and public affairs, who did not show up to vote and favored a more individualistic and private lifestyle. The Athenians understood that their democracy could only flourish if people were actively and enthusiastically engaged in all the issues relevant to their public and democratic life. The idiots' rejection of full and well-informed participation in both society and government was vehemently condemned as a reckless and irresponsible attitude that threatened the very survival of the Athenian city-state.

I have always believed the Church with a capital "C," meaning the Church Universal, has a theological mandate to be engaged with the world. As much as I enjoyed the blissful detachment that the last few services provided from the pulpit and from the weighty, complicated and divisive issues our society faces, I am convinced that idiocy – in its classical Greek definition – is not an option for the Christian community. To take our call to follow Christ seriously and faithfully, the Church has to be prepared to embody Jesus' love for humankind in the public square at a time in our country where the broad civic consensus on basic constitutional and democratic rights that many of us have come to take for granted appears to be unraveling quickly. Heather Cox Richardson, a history professor at Boston College, wrote in her daily substack publication that by stripping American women from the constitutional right to abortion, which Americans had enjoyed for almost 50 years, for the first time in our history, rather than conveying rights, the court has explicitly taken a constitutional right away from the American people.ⁱ The Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* will have serious political and social ramifications. After this historic ending of abortion rights, our society will be more gravely divided for years to come. Even Chief Justice John Roberts acknowledged in a concurring opinion he filed in the judgment that the conservative justices went too far. In Justice Roberts' own words, they – the justices - did not have to gut *Roe* "***all the way down to the studs.***"ⁱⁱ

Women, all women, but especially poor and underprivileged women, will experience very personally the full impact of the Supreme Court's decision. And Friday's ruling may not be the last time this Supreme Court revokes a constitutional right. There are many Americans today who are feeling more vulnerable and concerned about what the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* means to contraception access, gender and LGBTQ rights.

In this time of raw emotions where some feel the painful sting of disappointment, anguish and even anger while others celebrate and rejoice, I believe the Church has to be a space of grace and healing, compassion and understanding, hope and truth, reconciliation and love, prophetic courage and imagination that can bring people together to care for one another and to imagine a future where American women, all women, do have the right to full equality, the right to health, and the right to make decisions about their bodies, including whether to terminate a pregnancy.

To be very honest, it would be much easier for me if I did not have to preach this morning. Preaching is always a risky business, especially when it challenges the church to be at the very least aware if not fully engaged with the troubles and problems of the world. But this is a moment for the Church to embrace our call and our responsibility to not let people lose hope and appreciation for life in a democratic society. Our world right now is in a place that is too dangerous for the Church to devote ourselves to an inward-looking spirituality. The Christian faith is, in its very core, a divine invitation to all of us to live each day with our eyes wide open to the soft and gentle light of hope that persists even in the darkest moments of human history. At times, the light may appear to vanish momentarily; but even then, even when darkness appears to have extinguished all light, God's Word for us is that we take a chance and keep looking, keep going after, sweeping, and searching carefully for what we thought was lost forever, for those small wonders, those life-giving moments, those unexpected discoveries that bring joy, not just happiness, but real joy into our lives; joy that allows us to get up the day after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* and still find in our hearts the faith and strength to stand up for justice, for women's reproductive rights and to hold each other in love even if we do not share the exact same social and political views.

A couple of weeks ago, as I was preparing to stand at the pulpit again after a life-giving break, I re-read a poem written by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski entitled "*Try to Praise the Mutilated World*."ⁱⁱⁱ Listen to the poet's wise invitation to us all:

***"Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine and the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles...
You've seen the refugees going nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.***

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

*Remember the moments when we were together
 In a white room and the curtain fluttered.
 Return in thought to the concert where the music flared.
 You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
 And leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
 Praise the mutilated world
 And the gray feather a thrush lost,
 And the gentle light that strays and vanishes
 And returns."*

The first time I read Zagajewski's poem, I was struck by the poet's insistence that we try to praise the mutilated world because there is still peace and beauty in it. His tone changes throughout the poem from a tentative pleading to try, to the demanding tone of "should," and the final line where Zagajewski simply states, "***Praise the mutilated world.***"

At the very core of the faith that holds the Church together is also a simple and very demanding invitation, call, mandate to refuse to give up on what makes life worth living even in a mutilated world. The scandal of the Christian faith has always been this rebellious determination to turn our imperfect world upside-down and inside out in search of the small miracles that give people a deep and joyful appreciation for life. In 1965, rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said prophetically that humankind "***will not die for lack of information, but we may perish for lack of appreciation.***"^{iv} Christianity however has no lack of appreciation for the miracle of small things that make life worth living. Each page of the Gospel challenges us to appreciate the miracle of life that still thrives in this mangled, disfigured and vandalized world of ours. The Church never asks us to pretend that war, gun violence, climate change, racism, and the overturn of abortion rights do not touch us. They do! They cruelly mutilate our world with bombs, untimely deaths, global warming, and the denial of women's agency and access to reproductive healthcare, but in the face of injustice, suffering, and tragedy, the Christian story keeps pointing to the joy that exists and lives deep down in all things. It is this intentional and open-eyed appreciation for the joy that won't give into the mutilated reality of our world that has allowed Christians to place the cross in our space of worship and see in it not an instrument of capital punishment and terror, but a symbol of the victory of joyful faith over the world's penchant for abuse, torture, injustice, pain and death. In the very soul of the Christian proclamation lies the kind of joy that is thrillingly alive and wants to change people from being world-mutilators into joyful seekers of those forgotten and abandoned by society.

In this fraught moment for our nation, it is the Church's audacity to be involved in the issues that matter to women while looking for the divine joy that reminds us that goodness is more powerful than evil, hope is stronger than despair, light is stronger than darkness, and the quest for justice can still heal the open wounds of our mutilated nation that makes the Church's voice and our presence relevant to our society. Like the

shepherd who rejoices over one stray sheep found or a woman who throws a party for her friends over a lost coin recovered, we will not stop inviting each other to search and look for every opportunity to take risks to heal the wounds caused by Friday's ruling. There will be other times for celebration again! Believe it!

The weeks and months ahead will show us how the Supreme Court's decision will affect the lives of thousands of women in the country; but today I hope our church can make a choice, a decision to be joyfully and faithfully engaged in our world. I hope that we will hold on to each other even though we do not all share the same opinions about gun legislation and abortion rights and hang on to our God-given responsibility to search and look for the transformative and liberating joy that makes us remember of how good life can be despite the reality of our mutilated country this weekend.

This is not the first time we face a national crisis together and, because we have faith that the same God who got us through other national upheavals will also guide us through this time of social confusion and political turmoil, we will continue to gather to be reminded that what is lost will be found if we do not give into joyless and bitter resignation but keep looking for meaningful ways to honor the dignity of every woman.

And this morning, as we search for the joy that will keep us engaged and hopeful in our mutilated nation, I leave you with the words of another poet, the Persian poet Hafiz:

***“Out Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.”^v***

Friends, let's not let go from each other. Let's stick together. Let's look and search for joy in this mutilated moment. Together, let's search for ways to honor the life and body of every single American woman.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ By Heather Cox Richardson in [Letters from an American](https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/june-24-2022?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email), 24 June 2022
[https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/june-24-2022?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email].

ⁱⁱ By Brent D. Griffiths in Chief Justice John Roberts says Supreme Court went too far in taking the 'dramatic step' of overturning Roe v. Wade, Politics, Business Insider, 24 June 2022 [<https://www.businessinsider.com/roberts-supreme-court-went-too-far-overturning-roe-v-wade-2022-6>].

ⁱⁱⁱ By Adam Zagajewski in Try to Praise the Mutilated World, translated from Polish by Clare Cavanagh. The Dish, A Poem for September 11, 11 September, 2014. [<http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/?s=September+11>].

^{iv} Donald J. Moore. "*The Human and the Holy: The Spirituality of Abraham Joshua Heschel*," p. 44.

^v Translations by Daniel Ladinsky in The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, p. 165.