

October 23, 2023: Psalm 98
Together in Joy-Stewardship Sunday
Rev. Kelley Becker

Beloved minister and peace activist William Sloan Coffin said once that if he walked into a church as a visitor on a Sunday morning and the minister announced that it was Stewardship Sunday and he was going to preach a stewardship sermon, he, Coffin, would immediately bow his head and pray fervently for brevity. This is a stewardship sermon, and if you wish to pray for brevity, I will understand, but it is also a sermon about this church, and what possibilities are ahead for our life together, so I hope you will find it energizing and inspiring.

Disciples Christian Church, like all churches, is a community within a community, set within a state, nation, and world. All that context impacts this church, and it should if it is to remain relevant. The church should change as the world changes; if it doesn't, it will have lost sight of its identity, which is, *"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."* Living out our identity requires us to look with realistic eyes at the world around us, and it calls into community with all people because we believe community has the power to repair and heal the brokenness in the world.

So, what is the world like in 2023? There are more than 20 nations involved in armed conflict today...Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, Sudan, and too many others. Those conflicts cause instability, poverty, suffering, and homelessness. As I've said before, war is, indeed, hell. In the United States, families struggle with high food and fuel prices. People are buried in student loan debt. It is not unusual for seniors to decide between buying medicine and food. Trans people are four times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than cisgender people.¹ People of color are under-represented almost everywhere, except in prison, where they are incarcerated, often unjustly, at a much higher rate than white people². Christian Nationalism is prevalent in our communities and churches. There are more guns than people.³ Our state ranks in the bottom 5 when it comes to quality education. Banning books and controlling women's bodies is a priority for our state leaders. And in our community, in the last year, we have hotly debated water safety and availability, bonds, and the humanity of drag queens, but the silence about homelessness, lack of affordable housing, and public transportation is deafening. I could go on, but you get the idea. Everywhere we look, there are fragments.

¹ <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/ncvs-trans-press-release/>, accessed 10/18/23.

² <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/>, accessed 10/18/23.

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-25/how-many-guns-in-the-us-buying-spree-bolsters-lead-as-most-armed-country#xj4y7vzkg>, accessed 10/18/23.

If you listen to the news, you will hear the word unprecedented a lot. Unprecedented division. Unprecedented debt. Unprecedented violence. Unprecedented homelessness. It could lead one to ask, "Is this the worst time in history to be alive?" Scientists and historians who study this sort of thing say it is not. In fact, the time we are currently living in doesn't even make the top 10 worst times to be alive. The Black Death wiped out half of Europe. Both WW I and WW II were worse than right now, according to experts.⁴ History is full of unprecedented misery.

All of this to say, we are not the first to experience suffering. The stories in the Bible reflect our faith ancestors' experiences and their stories remind us that God's people have never been promised an easy life, but we have been promised we won't have to endure tough circumstances alone. The ancient Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, and God heard their cries; the Jewish people were exiled in Babylon, and the prophets offered comfort; the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, and the people learned that God wasn't confined to a building.

Humankind has experienced heartbreak and disorientation, grief and doubt, suffering and loneliness forever.

But hope has a way of sneaking in. Deep down, we know that, even when our present situation is chaotic and scary, our future doesn't have to be. Our faith ancestors found - even in the throes of enslavement, exile, and what felt like defeat - new songs to sing and new ways to stay together as a community. One of the songs they sang was Psalm 98, and we are still singing it today. It is a song of hope, praise, and thanksgiving in which all of creation recognizes the goodness of the Creator. This is Psalm 98:

O sing to God a new song,
for the Holy has done marvelous things.
God's right hand and holy arm
have brought victory.

² God has made known victory;
and has revealed vindication in the sight of the nations.

³ The Holy has remembered their steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

⁵ Sing praises to God with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the one who reigns.

⁴ <https://www.watchmojo.com/articles/top-10-worst-times-to-be-alive>, accessed 10/18/23.

⁷ Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the world and those who live in it.
⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
⁹ at the presence of the Holy, for they are coming
to judge the earth.
God will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

The Psalms, like the songs we listen to and sing today, help bring meaning to life. Theologian Dr. Walter Brueggeman writes, "...the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none has been expected. That new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no going back...the psalmist and the community of faith are often surprised by grace when there emerges in present life a new possibility..."⁵ The "wonders" and "deliverance" this psalm originally celebrated may have been a specific military victory, or much like our Easter or Pentecost hymns, the psalm may have been composed for an annual celebration in which the people gathered to worship. Just as the new song the Israelites were singing made a joyful noise, we are called to make our own joyful noise, not only when we sing and worship on Sunday mornings but by how we live the rest of the week. This fragmented world needs us to be bringers of wholeness and hope, and we are called to do that together. Together in Joy!

Now more than ever, we must show our community what love looks like. When the Church (with a capital C) is at its best, it is a bright light and a beacon of hope, calling people to connection and belonging. But the brand of Christianity many churches are proclaiming in this season has given rise to Christian Nationalism and has produced Christians who worship a white, privileged Jesus that would be unrecognizable to his first followers. To quote another psalm, in many ways, as we watch people flee Christianity, the Church is on a pilgrimage through the "valley of the shadow of death" right now. It is time to sing a new song and to sing it with joy.

Next week is Celebration Sunday when we will celebrate what we have done together this year. We have already been singing new songs of love, compassion, and inclusion. Bartlesville is better because Disciples Christian Church is here. 2024 will bring us new possibilities and perspectives, so today, I want us to dream a little about what our shared ministry could be in 2024. But first, let me share a little of what's already in the works.

Our Connections Youth Group is constantly morphing into the kind of community the students involved need and want. They are an extremely artistic bunch, and they love to create. Next year there will be more opportunities to use their artistic gifts to share their experiences and perspectives with one another, the church, and the community.

⁵ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis), 1984, 123-24.

In addition, Connections will lean heavily on service opportunities that will allow the students not only to learn about social justice movements but to make justice happen right here in Bartlesville.

For adults, Sermon Talk Back will return. This group will meet weekly to talk about the previous Sunday's sermon. We did this pre-COVID, and I loved it. It's a conversation and an opportunity to ask questions and share viewpoints. Sometimes there are stories or details that I would like to include in the sermon, but there isn't time, so Sermon Talk Back gives me the chance to talk about those and it gives participants a chance to share what they heard in the sermon...and sometimes it matches what I think I said!

Our Family Ministries team will work on new ways to bring all ages and stages together with intergenerational events and projects. Watch for the first one in December. In addition, Joyful Path, a monthly community-building group for 3rd-5th grade students, will take off. There will be food, fun, and friendships. I am excited about all of this, and I hope you are too. But I want us to dream a little bigger right now. I hope you will let your imagination run wild as we look at some possibilities.

First, how can we use our building and grounds to sing a new song in this time and place?

Let's imagine how we could use this building and the land that surrounds it. We have more green space than we currently use. Occasionally, we worship outside, and occasionally, we build a fire and enjoy some s'mores. A youth football team uses the field a couple of nights a week, some of our neighbors use it to exercise their dogs, and we try to be generous with building use requests for groups whose mission aligns with ours.

It costs us a lot of money to maintain this property. Taking care of our building and grounds is one way we practice good stewardship. And it is worth every penny because there are so many ways we could use our physical space to share love and build community. So, since we are spending the money to care for this property, let's do something or somethings cool!

There is a church in New Wilkesboro, NC, that dreamed of a park where children of all abilities could play together. The dream of Cameron's Place became a reality because the church partnered with other churches and community organizations to make it happen. What would you like to see a park next to our church in the field? Would this be a way of serving our community and welcoming people of all abilities?

A church in Wisconsin constructed a one-mile fitness trail. The black-top surface has eight challenge stations, a sports deck padded surface and is equipped with Fit Trail

equipment, including 29 concrete steps for cardio bursts. The Trail is open to the public.

The street DCC is on does not have sidewalks and does not have easy access to the Pathfinder trail. Would a fitness trail be a way of welcoming our neighbors who live close to the church?

Two weeks ago, we enjoyed worshipping outside in beautiful weather with some of our furry and scaly companions. We could create a designated outdoor space where we could have worship, but also host small concerts and other outside-appropriate community events. We could invest in the technology required to make it convenient and way more fun for our tech wizards. Would outdoor event space help us welcome artists and musicians to this space?

At the very back of our property, there is a labyrinth that is no longer visible. Walking a labyrinth is a way of connecting to the Sacred. The labyrinth is an analogy for life. It is not a maze or a puzzle to be solved but a path of meaning to be experienced. Its path has no dead ends. It has one way in and one way out. Would rebuilding our labyrinth help us grow spiritually and serve the community? The labyrinth on the screen is an indoor one at University Christian Church in Fort Worth, TX.

One church in Oklahoma City built a dog park. You didn't think I could throw out suggestions and not suggest a dog park, right?

In the winter, we host the Home for the Night Emergency Shelter when the temperatures drop to unsafe levels. Could we install showers and a washer and dryer so we could use them for the shelter and invite people who are experiencing homelessness to use them at other times? We get many calls to help with utilities. We can't always help financially, but having showers and laundry facilities here would be another kind of help.

There are so many possibilities! Let's stop paying thousands of dollars to mow property we don't use. Let's use it!

And now, "What can we do programmatically to reach out to our neighbors and help us engage our core values of Welcome, Grow, and Serve?" Some of these ideas require that we use our building and grounds resources, and others don't. And some of them are super simple and could be easy ways to embrace new possibilities.

You know we already host yoga on Wednesday afternoons, right?
What about candlelight yoga?

We could host a Little Free Library on our property, or better yet, we could choose a spot convenient for families who struggle to get to the library, like an apartment complex or next to a dollar store.

There is a church in Kansas that has two bicycles like this. The driver sits in the back and gives rides to two people in the front. The church takes the bikes to senior living facilities and offers the residents rides, and they love it! The church minister doing this contacted me and asked if we would be willing to try this if we were given the bike. And lest you think only a couple of us ride enough to be able to do this...they are e-bikes, so you don't have to have ridden across Iowa to participate.

Duluth lured developers to its city when they offered assistance to those who agreed to pilot innovative housing projects on hard-to-build-on lots, like this one. Bartlesville, like most towns of any size, has an affordable housing shortage. Might we serve our community by building tiny homes and helping connect people with resources?

I bet, I hope, you have ideas. We've spent the last 7 years re-introducing ourselves to Bartlesville. We have shown this community that we mean it when we say everyone is welcome. We have shown this community that we care deeply about Bartlesville being a safe, welcoming place for everyone. And we have demonstrated that we will put our resources behind those ideals. You pay your staff to serve the community. You pay to maintain property not only so we can use it but so others can too. But I will talk more about all that next week.

What's next? We must continue to get up every day and prove to our neighbors that we are who we say we are. We are a community held together by common purpose, not by common belief. In other words, we don't have to believe the same things in order to want the same things for Bartlesville and beyond. Let's sing a new song of joy together. Let's look at all we have and change how we use it so that the world can be changed. In 2024, let's a song that is so compelling that people who love and seek to be loved can't resist being part of it.

I hope, too, that **you** can't resist being part of it. I hope you will not only invest your time, talent, and treasure into this shared ministry, but you will encourage each other to do so. Now more than ever, your generosity can and will create change. We may not live in a time of unprecedented suffering, but there is suffering right here, and there is a need for community and belonging. In a time of injustice and struggle, we are a community of love and justice. In a time of silence and isolation, we are a community of gathering, a community of song, of new songs and new ways of singing, and new ways of being Church in the world. I look forward to 2024 and know that whatever the next chapter of our Sacred story brings, we will be together for joy.

You are invited to be part of it all. You are invited to be present, to participate, and to pledge your resources to make it all happen. Your pledges power everything we do. You decide what is next. You decide what 2024 will be like. Fortunately, I have a lot of faith in your decision-making. Please consider what you will give, fill out your pledge card, and bring it to worship next Sunday. Or go to our website and pledge online. We are better together. Amen.