

Renewing Our Commitment to a Harvest of Joy
Deuteronomy 16:13-17, Acts 2: 42-47, Matthew 25: 14-30
October 28, 2007

Today is Commitment Sunday and I have entitled my sermon for this occasion “Renewing Our Commitment to a Harvest of Joy.” For A.J. Jacobs, author of this book *The Year of Living Biblically*, religion and joy were not two words that he would necessarily put together. Jacobs is a non-practicing Jew who tried to be absolutely faithful to all the laws of the Old and New Testaments for one full year. The book is full of hilarious scenes of applying the ancient laws of the Bible to post-modern living in New York City. In one particularly hilarious scene he celebrates with several hundred Hasidic men a rite at the end of the festival of the Tabernacles. It is the last day of the festival, what is called *Simchas Torah*. It remembers a scene where King David is part of a parade bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem at festival time. David is dancing wildly with all his might before God. His dance is so unrestrained that his robe is lifted up exposing his nakedness to the maidens of the kingdom. It is with this kind of intoxicated joy at this harvest festival that Jacobs parties with these deeply religious men. Heavy drinking is not only tolerated; it is pretty much required. So here are these bearded, religious men dancing with each other, three sheets to the wind, like at a gay bar. The women are secluded off in an observation room, watching this wild site. Later in the party the dancing spills out into the New York City night, with these usually pious men weaving down the sidewalk singing in Hebrew at the top of their lungs, disappearing into the late autumn night. Jacobs describes the scene in this way: “I have never seen such pure joy. It is thick, atmospheric, like someone had released a canister of nitrous oxide into the room. Here we are, hundreds of dancing King Davids. Even for a

control freak like me, there is no other choice than to go along with it, bumping into these other bearded, sweaty, bouncing, deeply religious Jews.

This is the time of the year in the Jewish calendar for the celebration that is commemorated in our Old Testament lesson. Our text tells us that it is a feast of joy. It says that everyone in the community is to join in on the fun and give thanks to God for this fall harvest party, a feast of ingathering of the bounteous gift of God. And when you show up you must not show up empty-handed, but bring with you a gift proportionate to God's blessing upon you. You know there are almost 50,000 followers of Christ who also annually celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in traditions such as the Church of God and other charismatic and Pentecostal churches? This festival also has much in common with the American tradition of the Thanksgiving feast. Just as the Feast of Tabernacles remembers a difficult time when Hebrews wandered in the desert and lived in tents, Thanksgiving recalls the time when pilgrims lived simply and stoically on the early frontier.

I think it is also significant that Commitment Sunday in our tradition comes in the fall, at a time of the agricultural harvest, as we commit to a harvest of joy in anticipation of what God will do among us in the coming year. But how far has our culture come from the earliest Christian community that we read from the book of Acts. That was a counter-cultural community. Hear what the earliest Christians were about from what we just heard. They devoted every day to learning from the teachings of the Apostles, to prayer and to the breaking of bread in the worship life of the home. Miraculous signs of the Holy Spirit were all around. They lived together, shared all their possessions in common and no one had need. Now they still went to the Temple to worship like the

good Jews they were, but they were set apart by their daily meeting in homes, sharing a love feast, praising God and being people of joy. Now this was socialism, make no mistake. And if you withheld any part of your possessions from the common purse, like we read later about in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, you were struck dead. Now there's a story for Commitment Sunday! Seriously, God's reward to this radical community was that their ranks grew day by day. Now they were committed. Being a Christian was a risky proposition in which you risked your life, or at least might suffer persecution for your beliefs.

When Julius Caesar landed on the shores of Britain with his Roman legions, he took a bold and decisive step to ensure the success of his military venture. Ordering his men to march to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover, he commanded them to look down at the water below. To their amazement, they saw every ship in which they had crossed the channel engulfed in flames. Caesar had deliberately cut off any possibility of retreat. Now that his soldiers were unable to return to the continent, there was nothing left for them to do but to advance and conquer! And that is exactly what they did. Jesus Christ did not lead a conquering brigade but his call also left little room for retreat to the old way of living. In the sixth chapter of the gospel of John Jesus is teaching some tough stuff to the disciples about what it means to be one of his followers. Followers are leaving him in great numbers and only a few remain. Jesus looks at the twelve and asks them if they would like to retreat as well. Peter answers him, "Lord to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

So Jesus' following, just like the early church was small and just a little nutty. Shortly before his arrest in Jerusalem his followers ask him about the *end of the age*, the end of the world as they saw it. Jesus responds with many strange stories that warn them to get ready, to not listen to false prophets and then he tells them the parable of the Talents. Christ as seen in this parable as a landowner who gives large sums of money to three stewards and leaves them to their own devices. The first two are given large sums that they joyfully invest them in some sort of risk-taking projects. They view their stewardship as opportunities to multiply the Kingdom. When the landowner comes back to see the handsome returns on his investments he says, "Come, share my joy!" He gives them both even more responsibility. But the third steward is frightened by his master, hides the money and shows nothing for his investment. He sees his Lord as a difficult taskmaster and takes no risks at all. His theology of scarcity, his laziness, is severely punished by the Master. There is no joy in his countenance or in his actions. Stewardship for him is a hardship and a burden.

What makes today unique is not that we emphasize stewardship. That is something we live every day of the year. What makes it unique is that we come forward and we make a commitment for the coming year, a year filled with opportunity and risks. And in that commitment we look inside our hearts for the attitude in which we make it. Do we do it out of duty with little expectation of a return? Do we do it out of a fear of a vengeful God? Or do we do it out of a sense of joy and gratitude and even out of a sense of adventure. Does our heart dance like David?