

2021-04-18 Listen and Rejoice

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

It has been a really difficult week in our country, and just about any other week of the year, I would have set aside what I was going to preach about and focused on the things that we're seeing on the news and how we as people of Christian faith ought to be responding to that. As I think you understand once I am done with the sermon, I don't really have that luxury this week. And yet, as a church community, it's appropriate for us to acknowledge and to lament, and on occasions when our own complicity makes the situation worse, to repent.

And so, I have prepared a prayer of lament and repentance for us to pray responsively, and adapted this from a sibling church in Austin, Texas, that put something up that was beautiful on Instagram this week, and I actually even stole a line – borrowed a line – from Stacey Abrams, which I thought was quite powerful. So, I will read the text on the screen that's in white and you can respond with the text on the screen that is in yellow. And if you're worshipping with us from afar online, you will still be able to see it and you can pray the responsive parts, as well. So let's pray this together.

Lord Jesus Christ, who reached across the ethnic boundaries between Samaritan, Roman, and Jew, who offered freedom to captives: we come to you with heavy and troubled hearts.

[Congregation] Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

[Pastor Scott] We lament the senseless violence in our society. We grieve, especially this week, for the killing of Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo, and the victims of violence in Indianapolis. These were your children, made in your image. We grieve this loss of precious life.

[Congregation] Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Spirit, have mercy.

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[Pastor Scott] Be close to those who mourn and comfort those who are facing a painful reminder of the dangers of this world. May they feel seen and loved and valued by you and by your church. Fill them with your presence that they may experience your peace in their bodies, minds, and souls.

[Congregation] God, grant us mercy until the law gives us justice.

[Pastor Scott] Forgive us for the ways that we have minimize the pain of others, invalidated their experiences, and refused to consider the part we have played in racial divides and in the suffering of our neighbors. Forgive us for valuing comfort and power over the way of sacrificial love that Jesus teaches us.

[Congregation] Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Spirit, have mercy.

[Pastor Scott] Compel us to action, Lord. May we reject fear, apathy, and cheap unity. May your justice and peace roll like a river. Teach us to embody your commandment to mourn with those who mourn. Fill us with compassion and wisdom in how to be your hands, feet, and voice in this world.

[Congregation] Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

[Pastor Scott]

So, I'm going to read that passage that's on the screen in a few minutes; I'm going to set it up first. Today's sermon will be in two parts: we have a Bible part, and we have a business part. Because what you'll find pretty quickly is that if you take the Bible seriously, it will get all up in your business. And if you follow where the Spirit is leading in the scriptures, you might find you have some business to take care of. And we, as a church, have some Spirit-led business to take care of.

Again, let me say, I know that the world beyond this place is – feels like it's on fire right now, and one of the things I love about our community is that we have been able to pivot what we've been talking about to focus on current events, when it's appropriate to do so. There's just too many time sensitive things that have to do with this topic today that I was unable to move it. That's why we did such an extended prayer of lament, which we probably would have done even if I was changing the sermon, but I wanted to just give you a sense that next week our topic will include many intersections of race and ethnicity and gender, all of which are part of

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the mosaic of awful violence, oftentimes state-sanctioned violence, that we are seeing in our country right now. So, these are all of a piece; all of these things matter to us, and we will be continuing to talk about them and deal with them every week, as it's appropriate. So today, a Bible part and a business part. Let's talk Bible first.

Do you remember last week's story of Peter and Cornelius? (Or, as we realized, maybe we should change that around to be the story of Cornelius and Peter, because the author of the Book of Acts has put Cornelius's story first and Peter story follows that, which is not a mistake, And the order that things appear in the scriptures often matters a lot more than we might think.) So anyway, the story of Cornelius and Peter in ten seconds is that Cornelius was a Gentile and Peter was a Jewish Christian, and Peter didn't think there was any space for Gentiles in the Christian movement, but the Holy Spirit had other ideas. I guess I could have just said that last week. [laughs] We already got into lunch earlier.

Today's story in the book of Acts is from the next chapter and it's about what happens next. And so, let's pick it up in chapter 11. Now that we're back in the sanctuary, I'm resuming my tradition of not bringing my Bible with me. [laughs] And someone, usually Dan is resuming the tradition of replacing it for me. Thank you so much, my friend. "Sword drill" time. [chuckles]

Acts, chapter 11; I'm going to read verses one through 17 to start, and we're going to pause; don't read verse 18 yet. This, by the way, will fill in all the details, so if you missed last week you're going to be caught up right away.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we

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entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Now, we're going to stop there, as I said, and we'll come back for verse 18 in a minute. Did you catch in that telling of the story, the repetition of the three "stunning statements" from last week's message? They're slightly rewarded in Peter's telling on a couple of occasions, but the three stunning statements to review are these: first, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane;" second: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality;" and then third, which is the one he rewords the most: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" His slightly condensed version of that in the telling of the story to the church in Jerusalem was: "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Boom. "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Now, what do you suppose the church in Jerusalem said in response to Peter's story? The church in Jerusalem, by the way, they're kind of the authorities, right? Christianity was a Jewish movement and Judaism was centralized in Jerusalem; the temple was there, the leadership of the synagogues was there. What did the early Christians in Jerusalem do and say in response to Peter's story? Notice, if you will, in the story they had been quite aggressive in questioning Peter. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" This is just sort of a fairly graphic way of saying, "Why were you hanging out with Gentiles?"

And perhaps it would be worth thinking about that question for just a minute, because it *is* harsh; it does come across rather unkind. But, I would say that the question itself, if maybe not the tone of the question, is probably legitimate. It is natural and appropriate to question each other in the context of shared religious faith. It's natural when appropriate to question a leader if that leader – well, speaking as a leader, ever. Feel free. But especially if a leader appears to be departing from the shared tradition, appears to be leaving behind the agreed upon religious boundaries, it's appropriate to question that leader.

So, the early Christian church was a Jewish movement and they had no container, no framework, no capacity for this idea that the Gentiles might be included. That's not, strictly speaking, true; from the very beginning, God called the people of Abraham and blessed them so

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that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth – we'll continue to revisit that theme over the coming weeks. But as it was practiced, the Jewish faith at the time in that place didn't have a framework for understanding how the Gentiles might be included. In fact, everything in their scriptures appeared to point them to something else, so it's not necessarily wrong to ask an honest question in this situation, if it's an honest question. And maybe the jury's out on that, right? You ever had somebody who's, like, really being mean and they just say, "Well, I'm just *asking*." Well, you're telling. [congregation laughs]

I'm not sure which this was, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt for long enough to say asking the question itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Everything comes down to how you respond when you hear the answer. In this case, how the church would respond when they heard Peter's answer to the question, "Why were you fraternizing with Gentiles?" So, what did the church do and say in response to Peter's answer? Because, their reaction, their response is, in many ways, just as crucial to the explosion and expansion of the gospel as the beautiful story itself was. Because, think about it, it's well and good for one person, one household to come to faith – it's well and good for one leader to welcome that family or household or individual into the faith – but it's another thing altogether for that whole movement to be deemed acceptable by the powers that be.

So, let's now look at verse 18. I know half of you already did, already. Not only in spite of my admonition not to, but because of it. It's okay. I love you anyway. [chuckles]

When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

So, what did the church do in response to Peter's story? They were silent, which means they listened to it, and they praised God. They rejoiced; they celebrated what had happened. By the way, since I'm always imagining in my head the critiques, don't get too hung up on the word "repentance" that comes there in verse 18, right? Yes, the church is going to continue to call people to repentance from their sin, but the church, never at any time, asks anyone to repent of their very identity, never asks anyone to repent of how they were born, never asks anyone to repent of being the people that God made them to be. So, we could have lots of conversations about what that means, but let's be clear about what it doesn't mean. The church listened, and they rejoiced.

It made me wonder, as I was thinking through this this week, what would Peter have done if the church had responded differently to his story of the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles? What if

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when Peter said to them, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” the church had responded, “Well, there must be some kind of mistake, the scriptures are clear, it's the ‘plain reading of the text,’ you are ‘out of harmony with the discerned view of our body,’ and you either need to repent or move on.” What would Peter have done? How long would he have stayed to argue with them? How much abuse of himself, or of the precious Gentile people who had come to Christ under his leadership, would he have endured at the hands of those leaders, before deciding enough was enough? And if they had not responded positively and he had backed down, what would we think of him now? What would the Gentiles, whom he had welcomed initially, think of him, if he had gone back on that welcome? These are questions that are somewhat unpleasant and might not have easy answers, but thankfully the church did respond positively; the church listened and they rejoiced. I still wonder what would have happened if it had gone differently.

This brings me to the business part of the sermon. I'm sorry to tell you that our wider church family, our denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church, has not measured up to the early Christian Church when it comes to responding to God's welcome of marginalized people, and now I'm specifically thinking of LGBTQ people, recognizing that that isn't a perfect one-to-one analogy to the story from Acts 10 and 11, but arguing that it is close enough. And reminding all of us and anybody who might listen to this, that we have seen the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of precious people, producing fruit in them. Even in people who, we were always told, God would never work through — the Spirit would never be present in. And I'm happy to say that that has changed our hearts. It has changed my heart, it has changed many of your hearts. We now understand that God shows no partiality. Who are we that we could hinder God?

Now as you know if you've been part of the Artisan community for a while, we've been talking about this kind of thing for years now. And we have reported back our version of this story to our version of the church in Jerusalem. We have been working and hoping and talking and fighting for years and years now in the hopes that they would live up to the expectation and the standard set in Acts chapter 11, in hopes that they would listen, and that they would rejoice. But they haven't. On the contrary, they unfortunately seem to be doubling down on their policies and their postures of non-affirmation. And recently, we have witnessed a troubling lack of wisdom in how we see leaders in our denomination acting, which raises for our own leadership here at Artisan some real concerns about what shared Christian leadership ought to be.

I'm speaking quite plainly now because I think it matters to tell the truth. None of this erases any of the beauty and support and love that we've found in this church family over almost two

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decades of history. But the business that I need to tell you about today, and then try my best to explain to you in the time that we have left, is that Artisan's leadership team has decided to recommend a withdrawal from the Evangelical Covenant Church, as well as a revision to our LGBTQ inclusion statement to remove denominational restrictions on marriage. And that we are going to draft a proposal to that effect, which we're going to ask the members of our church to vote on at our annual meeting, which is on June 6.

[Applause and cheers].

This is a big deal. It's a lot to drop at once, in the middle of a sermon, no less. And I know that there's a range of responses and emotions right now, here in the room, watching online, listening to this later on the podcast. They range from utter joy, as you probably just noticed, maybe even frustration that this has taken this long, they range to utter shock and to fear and to worry. They include outright opposition to the idea, wondering how we could ever consider such a thing. Furthermore, I know that some of you are brand new to the Artisan community. What an interesting and amazing thing it is to me that you found us in the middle of a global pandemic [laughter]. I am deeply humbled that you have made this your church home at some point during the past year. And I completely acknowledge and recognize that it might feel extremely unsettling to have this be the thing that you hear about so soon in your journey with us. And wow, do I wish we could go through this together after COVID is over.

I look around the room and I see all of you, and I know all of you online are with us as well. I want you to know that we are in all of that together. We are a part of each other in that full range of emotions and responses to this news. We are a part of each other in the fact that some of us have been here for the whole 16-plus years and some of us haven't even been here for 16 days. We are a part of it, in all of it, together. So let me tell you briefly how we're going to try to move forward with this, and then we're going to take communion together like we always do. Because the whole point of this is that we're the family of God. I wish we could sit around an actual table across from each other and have an actual meal. But the sacred meal of Holy Communion, even taken in the kind of disintegrated way that we have to take it right now, I pray, will be a unifying sacramental experience for us.

So, the first thing is I know you have a million questions. Some of you have a million just yourself, but all together there's at least a million. I guess we need to find out if Google Forms can handle a million responses [laughs]. We'll know soon. So, Artisan's staff and leadership team are getting together for an extended kind of day-long meeting/day retreat on May 2, two weeks from today. That's why, by the way, Pastor Judy is going to be preaching the sermon that week. I wish that she could be here in the room and do that live but she's not able to travel that

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weekend, so she's going to do that over the internet, which is a great blessing in itself. So, we're going to ask you if you have questions to submit them in the next two weeks. And the way that you can do that is to go to www.artisanchurch.com/ask. That will redirect you to a form where you can type in as many questions as you have. That will also be linked from our page once it's ready. It'll be a few more days still. And what we're going to do at that meeting on May 2 is go through all of the questions that you've submitted and compile the most frequently asked ones into an actual FAQ, so that we can be more efficient in our presentations of the matter. And it is going to be important for us to talk about that in more detail, and in a way that would not be appropriate to talk about it in a sermon, even one that's half business by definition.

On May, 19 and 23 (that's a Wednesday and a Sunday) we're going to be holding town hall meetings where we can present the details of this proposal, and we can present our answers to the frequently asked questions, and where we can take additional questions that don't get answered in that FAQ, and then we'll pray together as a church community. May 19 and 23. These will both be hybrid events. We will rebroadcast them from the room like we're doing Sunday services here, so you can register to come in person for those (not yet, but you'll be able to by the middle of the week) and they will also be on Zoom. It's not going to be a public zoom like our Sunday worship is. It will be a registration event, so you'll need to do a little bit of an extra step to join us on Zoom but we encourage you to do that.

Then again on June 6, we will have our annual meeting at which will do all of our normal church business, plus we'll be voting on the language of these proposals. It's important that you know that there's no singular reason for this decision, and for it to have happened right now. This is not anything that's rash or hurried. This has been unfolding in our community and within our leadership discussions for years now. And this series does point us, primarily, to one thing, which is the open doors and specifically thinking about welcoming LGBTQ+ people into our community. But this bit of business that I'm describing to you right now goes beyond that, and it includes other concerns and matters that are really not appropriate for a sermon. They will come up in our town hall meetings and before our upcoming vote.

So as I wrap up here, I want to acknowledge that we might be feeling some tension in our bodies right now. We might be feeling unsettled or worried right now. We might be feeling those things even if we're also feeling joy and relief right now. And so I'm going to give you just one verse from the passage I will preach on in the final week of this series on May, 16, because I know that one verse is how I want to conclude the series. And I also want to give it to you right now because you might need it now, before we get to that week. In Acts 18, at the end of this kind of long run of stories of Holy Spirit-led disruption, the apostle Paul is kind of at the end of

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his rope with the powers that be: “And the Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.’” I want to speak those words to you now and remind you and encourage you that we are not alone — that we are God's people. And that even when the time comes for gracious separation among God's people (and there's a story in the book of Acts about that, too. It didn't make the cut for this series but it happens) that even when you have to separate from the people who were your people, you will never be alone. There are many in this city who are God's people, and we're going to take care of each other. That's my promise to you. And that goes for you, whether you're a longtime Artisan or a brand new person. That goes whether you are directly affected in your identity by this matter or not. We are going to take care of each other.

Let me conclude this sermon as I did last week, which is with an invitation. And this week I'm thinking of it as an invitation to choose love. Love has been so twisted, so abused, so limited within the church. That Gospel reading that we heard earlier, which was not one that I chose; our liturgy team chose that one. Thank you so much. “By this they will know that we're God's children, that we love one another.” But that love has been so twisted and abused and limited within the church. I want us to reclaim love, and I want us to allow love to reclaim us. And I wonder if today there are any listening to this who are sensing the spirit's call to reclaim love or to be reclaimed by love. Maybe you've been told that you're not worthy of love. Maybe you've been told that your way of loving is not worthy of God. Maybe you are one of the people who said that kind of thing to somebody else. In either case, today God offers you a fresh start. Will you accept that offer?

Some of you right now, I believe, need to pray the prayer, “I reclaim love for myself.” Others might need to pray the prayer, “I will allow love to reclaim me.” Either way, if you've responded today to this invitation of the Spirit, I would very much like to hear from you. I need to tell you that those of you who responded to me in person or over email after last week's invitation, you carried me through what was a very heavy and difficult week. You have buoyed me. And there wasn't any doubt in my mind that we had to do what we have to do, that I had to say what I just said. But those of you who responded last week and shared with me your personal stories, you are like kryptonite against whatever pushback I will ever receive from anybody. I hold you close to me. Please know that I will always stand with you. And if you can believe it, you are protecting me. That's the power of actually reaching out and responding if the spirit has spoken to you today. I get to share that with others in leadership at our church and you get to strengthen them, too. God is love. Love, we reclaim you. Love, reclaim us. Amen.

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[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).