

Scatter Joy (Christmas Eve 2009)

I'd like to invite you tonight to join me in a Conspiracy of Joy. That's right: a Conspiracy of Joy. The world as we know it right now feels like such a joyless place. Am I right? And even Christmas seems grim. I overheard a conversation just two days ago between two women. One asked the other whether she was ready for Christmas and the other replied – "Bought, wrapped and delivered under the tree. My God, I can't wait until it's over." Well, I thought, there's a joyless Christmas prayer: *I can't wait until it's over.*

Is that all there is? As I listened, I thought to myself, *Why do we do this to ourselves? What would happen if we called Christmas off? Maybe everybody would heave a big sigh of relief and wonder why we didn't think of this before! What a concept!*

I know, I know. I sound like the Grinch in Dr. Seuss's How The Grinch Stole Christmas. Do you remember how the Grinch thinks that if he whisks down on his ramshackle sleigh and steals all the presents from Whoville all the annoying joy would go away? The Grinch has, you remember, a heart "two sizes too small." Too small for joy, that is. It isn't until the Grinch *has* stolen all the gifts and Christmas *still* happens, that something puzzles the Grinch's puzzler and he suddenly realizes that Christmas *is a joy in itself*. The Grinch's heart, you remember, grows *three* sizes that day. He returns all the presents to Whoville and himself is asked to carve the Who Roast Beast.

I had my own Grinch moment on Tuesday. On my Christmas list of Things To Do was: *Wash my car*. I don't know why this was important to me, but I had this idea that a clean car and Christmas go together. Does anybody here have a list that

has *Christmas Creep* – “ought to’s” or “should’s” and “I gotta’s” that really don’t belong on the Christmas list, but you put them there as part of some notion that on Christmas *everything has to be just perfect?*

So I get my car washed down in the South End and head out to do some Christmas shopping. I haven’t gone very far when I hear a police siren behind me and see the blue lights in my rear view mirror. I pull over. *He can’t be after me, I think. I was observing the speed limit, stopped at the red light and signaled when I turned left. What could he possibly want?*

Well, as it turns out, he is after me. The problem, it seems, is that I do not have a registration sticker on my rear license plate. *Oh, I laugh to the officer, the sticker must have just come off in the car wash!* Guess what? He doesn’t buy it. So he collects all my information and goes back to his car. We sit. And we sit. And he does whatever police do. And we sit some more. Finally, he brings my information back to me, admits that in fact my registration is in order and instructs me to proceed to the nearest DMV to get a new sticker – and if I do not get it done now I will get a ticket at my next traffic stop.

Oh, good, I think. The DMV during Christmas week. Merry Christmas to you, too, Officer.

Not having a lot of choice in the matter, I drive directly to the DMV in Springfield over near the YMCA. Now, as you may know, the DMV in Springfield has its own traffic issues. You wait in line. You go to a window. They give you a number. You wait in line. You wait some more. You go to a window and if you’re lucky you’re at the right window for your issue and they don’t send you to the back of another line. Your turn comes. The clerk presses some buttons, shuffles some papers, then disappears looking for something. At a point at which she may have

gone home, showered, changed clothes, fed the cat and returned back to work, she reappears and you quake in fear that your issue *will be* resolved! Christmas at the DMV. Or so I grumble.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I arrive at the information window to get my number in order to get in line, state my case and the gentleman at the information window looks at my traffic warning and my registration, looks up at me and says, *Sure, I can take care of that.* He gets up, walks over to wherever DMV stickers must live, gets one, brings it back to me *in fifteen seconds*, gives it to me, and says *warmly* to me, *Here, have a Merry Christmas!*

If you had been listening, you could have heard my jaw hit the floor. I was stunned. What do you say to someone who has actually just made your Christmas a little merrier? I looked at him for a moment , and I believe my heart grew three times larger, and I thought to myself, *Wow. A Christmas miracle at the DMV. If he can do it, so can I!* And *then* I realized (to my chagrin!) just how small my heart had become.

I do want to be like him. I want to make *Merry Christmas* and not just say it. I don't want to pray for it to be over, I want to pray for it to be merry today tomorrow and the next day. At the top of my Christmas list I want to say, *Bring somebody a little unexpected joy.*

So I am inviting you this evening, to become a co-conspirator in a conspiracy of joy. I invite you to join me in scattering some joy. The Christmas story is so true in its grim picture of the world. There are Herods who want to kill the joy. There are innkeepers so busy putting on the season that there's no room for joy. There are

the rich and sophisticated who would never look in a lowly stable for the joy. There are the self-appointed commandment keepers who would judge an unwed mother an unfit mother for joy. Then there are simply those many who have lost hope that Joy-is-with-us. For all these, there is no reason not to be joyless.

But Christmas is a joy in itself, one intended to spill over into everyday. I yearn, like shepherds and wise men, and listen for angels. Imagine that we hear good news. Imagine that we hear that our task is to scatter joy in a world that has forgotten what joy is. Imagine the power of our words tonight: *God is here! The Lord has come.* Imagine the power of our own words. The power of *I love you.* The power of *I forgive.* The power of *There is a truth to be told.* The power of *Come with me.* The power of *Here, have a Merry Christmas.*

I received a call late yesterday that one of the dearest people at South Church, Katherine Mecum, is nearing the end of her life and has now lost her sight. She sent a message to me that perhaps I might come see her after Christmas when the busyness of the season is over. *No, I thought, what better time than Christmas.* So I drove up to Loomis House this morning. I was still thinking how to end this sermon tonight. As I drove, I remembered that Katherine is a great reader and since in this sermon I had been thinking about the Grinch and my own heart growing an extra size or two, I brought with me Dr. Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas. I thought it might be a way of including Katherine in the conspiracy tonight, and to remind all of us that there is no place where joy does not belong.

Katherine and I talked a while about how she is and what's coming. We prayed. I asked her if she would like me to read her a story, and what the story was, and she said, *Yes, I'd like that.* So I read the whole Grinchy story and Katherine

listened carefully. I stopped once or twice to see if she could hear me and she nodded vigorously and said, *Go on*. When I came to the part toward the end of the story where the Grinch has stolen everything from the Who's down in Whoville that has to do with Christmas and he forces his made-up reindeer Max to pull the whole ramshackle sleigh with all the presents in it up to the tippy-top of Mt. Crumpit – to dump it – do you remember this part? – the Grinch stops in the early morning light to listen – to listen for the sound of misery coming up from Whoville. And what does he hear? It goes this way:

But the sound wasn't sad!

Why, this sound sounded merry!

It couldn't be so!

But it WAS merry! Very!

He stared down at Who-ville!

The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook!

What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,

Was singing! Without any presents at all!

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!

IT CAME!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"

It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.

Maybe Christmas....perhaps...means a little bit more!

Well, at that point, tears are falling, Katherine's and mine. And a couple people in the hallway stopped to listen. And their eyes seemed to fill up. And Katherine grasps my hand a little harder as I read.

At the end of the story, you remember, the Grinch is asked – he the thief, he the liar, he the *forgiven one* – is asked to carve the Roast Beast.

And so might we all. So might we all have a place at the feast. But here's the secret. The joy? *You can't have it until you give it!* That's what the world doesn't understand. And never will, unless somebody conspires to *scatter some joy*.

Will you join me in a conspiracy of joy? Tonight? Tomorrow? The day after?

Amen