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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Joanna: All She Was Meant To Be”

Scripture Texts: Luke 8:1-3; 23:54-24:10

Dear people of God, “Joanna and Chuza! They’re made for each another!” “Joanna and Chuza! The perfect couple!” “Joanna and Chuza! A match made in heaven!”

Yes, when anyone in King Herod’s court spoke of his finance minister, Chuza, Joanna’s name was invariably mentioned. It was said by one, “Joanna and Chuza! They belong together, like two peas in a pod.” And then another would chime in, “Inseparable, that Joanna and Chuza, like Siamese twins.” They had been married for 20 years. Chuza had been Herod’s finance minister for about five years now and Herod was delighted every time Joanna accompanied her husband to the court social functions. It was heard coming from Herod’s mouth often, “How charming,” whenever he saw the two of them together as Chuza beamed and Joanna blushed.

As the years rolled by, the court officials never tired of covering Chuza and Joanna with compliments. Everyone looked forward to seeing

the two of them together.

But then something changed. Not with Chuza. He never tired of bringing Joanna to the endless round of social events that he was expected to attend. But something happened to Joanna. It didn't happen suddenly. But little by little she started to become bored and restless. It reached a point during one of these social occasions that after Chuza praised Joanna in public, saying, "My Joanna, how you please me so!" she snapped back, "I'm not your Joanna!"

Everyone was startled. Most of all, Chuza. He quickly apologized to the crowd that was now gathering around them, conjuring up a fib that Joanna had not been feeling well lately and that everyone should please excuse her for her outburst. When the crowd dispersed, Chuza took Joanna aside and asked, "My dear, what's wrong?" She said, "Nothing, just nothing, I don't know." She didn't know what to say because she didn't really know what was wrong. But she knew that something was definitely not right anymore. Chuza shrugged his shoulders and joined the other guests at the function, dismissing the outburst. But Joanna went off to be by herself with tears in her eyes.

The following night, Chuza and Joanna were invited as guests to King Herod's birthday party at his palace. This time Chuza would do more

than just shrug his shoulders in reaction to Joanna. During the party, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, Herod's wife, danced in the king's presence. She so delighted Herod that he promised to give her whatever she desired, up to half his kingdom. Salome, still only a teenager, left the hall for a few minutes to discuss with her mother what she should ask for. Her mother, Herodias, was a spiteful woman who deeply resented John the Baptist because he told Herod it wasn't lawful for him to marry her, since she was Herod's brother's wife. And so, the nasty Herodias told her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Surprised by this request, but wanting to save face in front of all his guests, since everyone heard him make the promise to Salome, the king grudgingly ordered for the prophet's head to be brought into the banquet hall on a platter.

Joanna's mouth opened in horror. She couldn't believe the sight before her as the platter was brought into the hall with the bloody head of John the Baptist on it. She had never met the Baptist, but she admired him for publicly speaking out against Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias. Joanna never mentioned to Chuza about her admiration for the prophet because she didn't want to displease him. But this latest episode was too much for her. She immediately told her husband, "I want to leave. Now!" Chuza answered, "But dear, we can't leave now. The party

isn't even half over. Everyone will notice. It would be showing disrespect to our host."

But Joanna was in no mood for compromise. She replied, "I don't care what the king thinks. I don't care what the guests think. I'm repulsed by what has just taken place! I can't stand being here anymore!" She then got up and headed toward the door. Chuza followed her and grabbed her shoulder, "Joanna, I need you at my side. You will not embarrass me in this way. How will I look without you next to me? How will I be able to explain that you left, but I stayed?"

"How will you look?" asked Joanna with big eyes. "Do you see that mirror?" she asked, pointing to a wall of mirrors at the entrance to the palace. "Find out for yourself!" she cried, and then she pulled her arm away and darted out of the banquet hall as everyone watched.

King Herod then got up from his seat and slowly walked over to the flustered Chuza, asking "Where did your Joanna go?" Chuza stuttered an answer as best he could, "Um, well, you know, your highness, she hasn't, um, been feeling well lately, and she, uh, well, she has a fever and she had to leave."

The king simply said, "Oh?" He didn't seem convinced. Finally, Herod replied, "Don't you think you should be with her?" Chuza quickly replied,

“Yes, of course.” And then he added, “My apologies, your majesty. With your permission, I take my leave,” and he made a hasty retreat from the hall.

Outside the palace, Chuza eventually caught up with Joanna and demanded, “Why have you done this? Don’t you realize what this can do to my career? My future? Well, answer me. Now! What do you have to say for yourself?”

At first Joanna just stood there silently, staring into Chuza’s eyes. Then finally she said, “I see more clearly than I ever have what being your Joanna has done to me and how it will destroy me if I keep living this way. What do you think I am? Some trophy wife, some pet for you to keep around the house and escort you to social functions to make you look good?” Joanna winced and shook her head. “You know, Chuza, for years, it gave me pleasure to please you!”

Chuza interrupted, “And now? Pleasing me doesn’t matter?” Joanna answered with anger in her voice, “No! Not anymore. Not after tonight. Not after what I just saw in there. Everyone dotting all over Herod, including you, after he murders a righteous man on a self-indulgent girl’s whim! And all you care about is what you’ll look like without me at your side. Well, the time has come for me to stop being your Joanna!”

Chuza's face now also filled with anger. He said disdainfully, "Oh, is that so? Who do you think you'll be without me? Take a little time to think about what you've just said and maybe you'll reconsider!" Chuza then turned around and marched off into the dark night.

For the next couple of days, Joanna pondered what had happened. Her outburst at the banquet hall had even surprised herself. What she had slowly suspected, but never clearly understood until the night of her outburst was that she was no more than an ornament in his life. But now she knew she had to lead her own life. Yet, she wondered if she was being too headstrong. "What am I doing? Am I being selfish? Do I want only to please myself? What will I do if I leave my husband? What will I do with my life?"

She was struggling with these questions as she walked down the road. Suddenly she saw a crowd in the distance. They were seated on a grassy knoll off the road. They were all listening intently to a man who looked like he was in his 30s who stood in front of them.

Curious, Joanna walked over to a woman who was standing at the foot of the grassy knoll listening to the man. Joanna tapped the woman on the shoulder, and asked who that man was who was speaking. The woman answered, "He's Jesus of Nazareth." Joanna thought to herself,

“I’ve heard of this Jesus of Nazareth. He’s supposed to be a prophet as John the Baptist was. Yes, this Jesus supposedly speaks his mind just like the Baptist and doesn’t care what people think. He cares only about doing God’s will.”

Joanna walked closer to the crowd and sat down beside them. Though she was at the far end of where Jesus was speaking, she had no trouble hearing his booming voice. “Friends, if any of you want to join me, I invite you to do so. But you’ll have to say no to those who want to stop you. That could mean your parents, your brothers and sisters, yes, even your spouse. There’s pain involved in deciding, but if you’re not willing to embrace pain for the sake of God’s kingdom, then it’s better if you go home right now.”

His voice was gentle, but firm, and his words weren’t lost on Joanna. She said to herself, “Why, he’s read my mind. He knows my anguish! I must hear more!”

And so, Joanna listened to him, not only that day, but all the days following. She began to follow him wherever he preached. It wasn’t long before she became friends with two other women who also were groupies of this Jesus of Nazareth. One woman’s name was Mary Magdalene. The

other woman was named Susanna. The three followed Jesus wherever he went.

Joanna now found her purpose in life. She was no longer Chuza's Joanna. No longer did she strive to please the finance minister of that despicable King Herod. Now it pleased her to follow Jesus. She was now her own Joanna.

Joanna's life speaks to each one of us. Whose life are we living? We can live for years doing what others expect without ever really knowing what's in our own best interest. Though we should strive to live with others, we should never live for them. Because if we do, we will never be happy. Living according to the expectations of others will guarantee that we will never attain any self-identity.

One reason we live so attached to others is our fear of not surviving on our own. The messages we hear from our families of origin, our spouses, and our friends tend to be, "You can't make it on your own," "You're too old to make a change in your life," "Why do you want to disrupt your life to go back to school, or to get a new job, or to try something new? These messages rarely help us to reach maturity, emotional or spiritual maturity.

Many of you know that I sit on the Central Association Committee on Ministry. Part of our job is to examine students in discernment, that is, students attending seminary and who intend to fulfill the requirements to become ordained clergy. What I find heartening about these students in discernment is that they tend to be persons in their 40s. The ministry is usually a second or third career for them. They've lived long enough to know what the world is all about and they've heard God's call to enter the ministry, despite the fact that they usually have teenage children, if not older, and have chosen to give up, very often, a lucrative profession. And, oh yes, one more important thing. They tend to be women.

These are persons who, as they enter midlife, realize that they haven't been living their own lives. Overly dependent on spouses or others as sources of self-worth, they did whatever was in their power to please them. But now they realize that they must do what's pleasing to God.

We certainly don't all need to becoming ministers to please God. Only those who are truly called to the ordained ministry should pursue that profession. But all of us should pursue what we think we should be doing to win self-approval, and most importantly, God's approval. We should be doing what will bring peace and satisfaction. If we're not

willing to do that, then we will become paralyzed. We cannot spend our lives doing what others want us to do. If we do, we will never be content. We must have the courage to risk offending people, and perhaps, even hurting them in order to pursue the course of action that God wants us to pursue. An excessive need to please means never really choosing what accords with our own real needs and aspirations. In other words, living the way others would have us do is hiding our light under a bushel.

Joanna illustrates a middle-aged person who takes the first, painful step out from under the basket of another's identity in order to find herself. It's painful because she feels guilty and anxious as she takes that bold step. Like Joanna, we sometimes have to embrace uncomfortable feelings of guilt, anxiety, and loneliness as we become all we're meant to be. But it will be worth it.

As we heard from the scriptural text read by Jannelle, Joanna became one of the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is another woman, Junia, mentioned as prominent among the apostles in the last chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Many scholars believe that Junia is Joanna, that they're the same person. One of the criteria for being an apostle is to have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Joanna or Junia was one of the first to fulfill that criterion. Her

courage to leave Chuza and find her own God-given destiny resulted in her being remembered by hundreds of millions of Christians to this day as a notable faithful figure in the drama of the Christian story. Amen.