

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager

January 12th, 2025

Sermon Title: "Jazzed"

Texts: Psalm 30: 1-4, 5b, 11-12, John 1:14, Luke 12:22-27, 29, 31

On a field trip to New York City a few days before the New Year, my cousin and I followed the directions of the tour guide to Edgecombe Avenue in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Harlem. I'd initially been looking for the home of Paul Robeson, the magnificent singer and civil rights activist from the mid-20th century and was directed to this famous Beaux Arts building where a free jazz concert was reportedly taking place.

155 Edgecombe Avenue is one of the most famous buildings in New York City Harlem and on the registry of Historic Places. This block of apartments has been home to many prominent African Americans in the early mid-20th century and was the center of the Harlem Renaissance. Count Basie, Duke Ellington. Langston Hughes lived there. At one point, W.E.B DuBois and later Chief Justice Thurgood Marshall and the artist Faith Ringgold lived up the street. Great spirits are everywhere here!

Mrs. Marjorie Eliot's name has surely been added to the great African Americans from the neighborhood. She is famous for hosting the longest running Jazz Parlor in NYC - from her living room. Sunday by Sunday for the past 40 years, "Marjorie" (as she likes to be called) has opened her front door to jazz artists and audiences alike creating a sanctuary of jazz every Sunday from 3:30-5:30, (She's the one playing the piano in our bulletin cover today with a guest saxophone player, Cedric Mayfield).

Waiting in the spacious lobby for the elevator, we could hear the strains of the clarinet emanating from her 3rd floor apartment. We weren't on a wild goose chase after all!

It was a chilly Sunday afternoon in Manhattan but not in apartment #3F. Stepping out of the elevator we turned toward the music, and found ourselves at the overheated doorway. Music poured out into the hallway where more people stood and listened. Marjorie's 700 square foot flat was jammed with strangers like ourselves eager for an afternoon of free jazz as well as players with their horns, tourists from around the world and neighbors from across the hall.

Standing at the threshold, I had the feeling that we'd been invited not only into Ms. Marjorie's living room but also into her heart.

Peering into her packed apartment, I saw people lining the walls, standing room only, heads bobbing in time with my own. A red bulb hung from the living room ceiling giving the space a warm glow. Marjorie's jazz parlor is a **time capsule** of Harlem's rich cultural history. There were Photographs and newspaper clippings on the walls of jazz greats Billie Holiday and Sonny Rollins alongside her family photos. A Christmas tree glittered in the corner as Mrs. Eliot tickled the ivories and the saxophone played on.

This was holy ground.

..."*It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing*" played on and on as each musician took a solo, getting the crowd moving. It felt like the spirit of Duke Ellington might have been here in the corner, too.

Someone passed around snack bars. Someone else, a hat for donations. It was a joyful hour.

According to news articles, Mrs. Marjorie, is an ageless octogenarian who had 4 children, 3 of whom have died. When her first child, Philip passed away in the early 90's at the age of 27, Ms. Marjorie started these jazz jam sessions as a way to honor his memory and handle the loneliness of Sundays. She found a way over the years to live

with her own grief, keeping the chairs always set up in rows waiting for the next concert.

She attributes her resilience to what she calls “the healing power of being together.”

In an interview for the BBC a few years ago, Marjorie shared that “The audience coming is the most important part for me. They trust me. And they celebrate with me...The celebration honors my children.”¹

I could hear the ancient psalmist of Psalm 30 singing down through the ages, “You have turned my mourning into dancing for me; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever (Psalm 30: 11-12).

Leaving Marjorie’s apartment that day was like leaving the home of a friend. Walking back out into the craziness of the world felt abrupt. But somehow the sanctity of the experience- of that improvisational community- has stayed with me, as well as, the power of the music and the artful hospitality and joy offered to all visitors.

Jesus tries to tell us in today’s scripture passage, “Do not worry” about all that is ahead...”consider the lilies, they neither toil nor spin...” and remember to “strive for God’s kin-dom.” (Luke 12:22-31).

I try my best to follow that wisdom but sometimes it's nearly impossible NOT to worry about the state of our world. It’s easy to feel demoralized and weighed down by the enormity of what is before us. With wildfires raging in Los Angeles, with the Inauguration on our doorstep and with the looming threat of mass deportations, Jesus' words can seem out of sync with the times.

Consider the lilies...

And yet, we know as people of faith, that Jesus is inviting his listeners to move beyond the binary thinking of either/or”. Ted Loder wrote in his book, *"The Haunt of Grace"*, “The point is that God doesn't intend us to either improve the world or enjoy the world. God intends us to do both. Praise is the way we keep our balance between the two...the thrust of Jesus' words is that gratitude is the engine of moral action...” We need to be surprised by joy *and* we need to strive for equality and justice. Both. We need to immerse and ground ourselves in beauty and we need to join in communities of care for those in need.

Marjorie Elliot’s weekly open-door jazz invitation reminded me that even as we may despair over current events, we can still offer gratitude and enjoy the daily glimpses of grace that come our way. In fact, we must seek them out.

Otherwise, our faith and our actions, well, they “Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing”...

There have been several gatherings in our church this week that have reminded me of that Harlem apartment riffing with jazz and of the art of hope found in a community.

On Thursday night, thanks to Carleen Gerber and Ned Forman from our church, we hosted a Town Hall here in our meetinghouse with a panel from the CT chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). There must have been over 200 people here, many from the wider community. Now there wasn't any music playing but there was the sound of many voices earnest in the effort to join together for our common humanity. It was hopeful to see so many neighbors coming out on a cold night who were attuned to the needs and issues we'll all be facing together after January 20th.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/travel/bespoke/untold-america/new-york-test/>

The ACLU panel talked about creating “chapels of democracy” like ours and offering strategic planning, resources, and advocacy for the uncertain road ahead. “We are here”, said Communications Director, Bethany Perryman, “because we need all of us and are playing the long game”...focused on racial justice.

I was reminded of that famous saying of Dr MLK Jr whose birthday we’ll celebrate in a couple of weeks, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

And together, we must keep striving for it...

Yesterday, we honored the life of an extraordinary woman from FCCOL, Mrs. Judy Simmons. In her 90’s, Judy (and her husband Phil when he was alive) devoted their lives to “love thy neighbor”. Judy served in many roles at our church as many of you know and was a Deacon Emeritus for her remarkable prophetic contributions here. She was devoted to justice for Palestinians and the Tree of Life. She was also a nurse and a nurse’s honor guard performed a ceremony here as well.

And I learned just the other day that Judy and Phil were concerned about the shortage of housing in East Lyme and gave an acre of their own land so that a Habitat for Humanity home could be built here. Some of you may have been a part of that build. Judy lived at Essex Meadows for two decades and even as recently as last year, Judy was always trying to find ways to include people on the edges of her community.

Judy, like Marjorie, who organizes those Sunday jazz gatherings, knew that in spite of her own grief, how to enjoy her life and to share it with others!

That art of community in good faith and in good company is something we seek to live out together here at FCCOL, something we strive for as we seek to offer hospitality to whoever walks through our doors.

In his memoir, Jazz artist, Wynton Marsalis (Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life), wrote about the life lessons that jazz has taught him.

“Jazz reminds you that you can work things out with other people...when a group of people try to invent something together there’s bound to be some conflict. Jazz urges you to accept the decisions of others. Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow—but you can’t give up, no matter what. It’s the art of negotiating relationships with style”...and improvising together to find solutions for our living.

Call it Church,
Call it Jazz!

The music here will play on!
(Guest clarinetist begins playing “It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got that Swing” by Duke Ellington.