

Sermon for Sunday, July 25, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"PICCOLO PLAYER IN GOD'S BIG BAND"

St. John 21:15-22

Text: "Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me! . . .'" St. John 21:22

Sir Michael Costa, the 19th Century Italian conductor and composer, is reported to have once stopped the orchestra in the rehearsal of a resounding passage. He looked about and said, "Where is the piccolo?" Perhaps in the massiveness of the music being played with full orchestra, the piccolo player felt his small instrument and his small contribution to the total effect was not worth making. Perhaps he thought that with the massive sound of the total orchestra, the sound of his small instrument didn't count for much. Yet, the conductor missed it. He missed it because it added that final touch to a perfect harmony he sought to achieve.

In the world in which you and I live, great events, great dramas are unfolding that are of historic significance. The role we play in life and in history may seem small to us and we may not seem to count for much. We may be just piccolo players in God's big band. Yet, I want to suggest to you this morning that the conductor of the symphony of life--in spite of global events, in spite of the great, sweeping drama of history--expects to hear the piccolo. With this in mind, I would like for us to think together this morning about playing the piccolo in God's big band.

If you were going to play in a massive band, what instrument would you like to play? Would you like to pound the big bass drum? Would it be the slide trombone? Would it be the big-mouthed, shiny tuba? Or would you like to be the one who crashed the cymbals together? Well, the fact is, there are ten talent people and five talent people in the world, but most of us are one talent people. To put it another way, we are piccolo players. So, the first point I want to make is that to play in God's big band we have to be ourselves.

To be one's self can be very difficult. Many of us feel that often we are acting roles--we are trying to be something we are not, we are playing the wrong instrument. I know of a young lady whose father was greatly disappointed that she, an only child was not a boy. He wanted a son to follow him in his law practice. The young lady tried hard to be what her father wanted and she entered law school after graduation from college. But she was not cut out to be a lawyer. She was artistic in temperament and the study of law was smothering her spirit. Before long she was under the care of a psychiatrist, simply because she was trying to play the wrong instrument in God's big band as she tried to be what somebody else wanted her to be.

Sometimes we try to be something we think we ought to be. I have a young friend who thought he ought to be a pharmacist. He had no inclination for chemistry, but he did have two uncles who were successful pharmacists. He thought he ought to be a pharmacist, too. Now, he tried hard. He studied hard in college and for awhile he got by. Yet, as the amount of knowledge he needed accumulated with each school year, he fell further behind until he could no longer pass his grades. Finally, he came to me in tears and said, "What shall I do?" It had never occurred to him to be himself--to play the piccolo.

There are other pressures brought to bear on us that try to shape, to bend, and to mold us. At the office we are one person, at the home we are another, and at a party we may be someone entirely different. I know I find myself playing certain

roles as a minister simply because in a particular situation this is what is expected of me and I catch myself trying to play some instrument simply because someone expects it of me. Our personalities become a battle ground of conflicting drives and motivations. A working mother once said to me, "At the office I am a smooth, efficient secretary; at home I am the loving and understanding mother and wife; at the church I am the reliable worker; in the PTA I am the one they count on to get things done. "The truth is," she said, with a look of despair, "I really don't know who I am!" And so many of us this morning have that problem--we don't really know who we are--who the real "me" is.

Let me suggest that one of the first steps in being ourselves, in playing the piccolo in God's big band, is to have a healthy appraisal of our limitations. Notice I said a "healthy appraisal." Most of us do not look at our weaknesses in a healthy way. Instead, we compare ourselves with others who can do things we cannot and accuse ourselves for it. We whip ourselves with self-criticism and exaggerate our own deficiencies while at the same time we magnify and enlarge the poise and abilities of others. Naturally, this creates a sense of inferiority and a crushing sense of insecurity.

One unhealthy way we react to this sort of analysis of our limitations is by daydreaming or fantasy. Daydreaming is a way of compensating for real or imagined weaknesses by projecting oneself into a land of make-believe in which our deficiencies or weaknesses vanish. Do you remember James Thurber's "Walter Mitty?" Walter is a mousy, henpecked, shrimp. Yet, within his own mind Walter lives an exciting life. He is a race car driver taking great risks, he is a soldier going out on some impossible mission. Unfortunately, he is always jerked back to harsh reality by the stern voice of an irate wife! All of us daydream some, but the person who consistently evaluates his weaknesses in an unhealthy manner will more and more be unable to tell where the imagined world leaves off and the real world begins.

Another direction an unhealthy analysis of our limitations may lead us is into despair. We convince ourselves we can't do a certain thing and refuse to even try. We eliminate the possibility of defeat or failure by refusing to make an effort. Here is a girl who is not as pretty as other girls, so she lets herself go completely. She does not fix her hair or wear her clothes attractively. She refuses to learn how to use make-up properly and does not watch her weight. "What is the use of trying?" she asks, "I can never be pretty anyway." Or here is a student who says, "I can't make the grades the other fellows do, so why should I bother. My I.Q. is just not as high as theirs." Or here is a man who says, "I just can't sell anything. I don't know how to talk to people, so what's the use?" The fact is, these sorts of unhealthy appraisals of one's limitations relieve them of all personal responsibility. After all, one cannot be blamed for failure if he never even tries.

But a healthy appraisal of our limitations and weaknesses sees them as they are. To be ourselves we must realize and accept the fact of imperfection in our make-up. The ugly girl can never be attractive as possible as long as she won't even try. The poor student can never use what brains he does have as long as he gives up. The salesman can never sell if he is not even willing to try. On the other hand, as a person realistically appraises his weaknesses he can say, "I wish I had more to work with, but this seems to be all I have. I will see what I can accomplish with it." This sort of self appraisal is healthy--it is dynamic and creative. It clears out the underbrush and lets us get at some creative endeavor. It lets us deal constructively with our weaknesses.

The second step in being ourselves is to have a healthy appraisal of our strong

points. While each of us has many weaknesses, we also have some strong points, too. I know a young lady who is as plain as can be. Yet she has some other qualities. She has the ability to be warm and friendly, to make you know that she is interested in you as a person, that you matter to her. Somehow she becomes beautiful. She was voted a campus favorite at college and, incidentally, she married the most popular and best looking boy on campus! She had a healthy appraisal of her weaknesses, but she also had a healthy appraisal of her strong points.

Foulton Ousler tells the story of Emily, a tall, bony, and instinctively awkward person. A friend invited her to a church social, but on the condition that she would help him. Any time she saw a person standing alone, she was to ask his hobby and come tell her friend. He would try to match the person up with someone of equal interest. "Keep busy," he said, "as if you were hired for the evening to look out for everybody's comfort." Much to Emily's surprise, she had a wonderful time. She was actually popular that evening. By using what personal resources she did have, she accomplished something for herself that no one else could have ever done. She made herself lovely.

Sometimes we feel we have no strong points, no abilities. We are so crushed down by our own tragedies and failures that we will not even try. Our true self can never come out unless we emphasize what we can do. Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau was sent as a young doctor to the mountains where he expected to die of tuberculosis. But he did not die. As he lay in bed he had a great vision of a hospital where he could rebuild other sufferers. Flat on his back he used the one strength, the one remaining ability, he had--his medical knowledge. From his bed he examined patients not as ill as he himself was. He got better and began to raise money. He labored until his dream became the great sanatorium at Saranac. By emphasizing what he could do he turned a sick and dying young doctor into a physician of world-wide fame. You see, in some mysterious way, our spiritual, our mental, and our physical health are all inter-related. By doing what he could, Dr. Trudeau was giving himself total health.

So, to be ourselves we must not only have a healthy appraisal of our weaknesses, but we must also have a healthy appraisal of our strong points. I have a friend who has little leadership ability in the church. Yet, Sunday after Sunday, he stands at the door of the sanctuary passing our bulletins, welcoming visitors, greeting worshippers, saying a word of friendly welcome, or paying some small compliment. He is perhaps the best-loved member of his church and they say of him that the doors couldn't open on Sunday mornings without him. He is emphasizing the thing he can do and is making a significant contribution to the life of his church.

Tied quite naturally into this is another step in being yourself. It is to recognize--and appreciate--your uniqueness. It is an amazing world we live in. We are told that no two snowflakes are exactly alike. We are told that no two of us even have identical fingerprints. Yet, perhaps the most amazing thing of all is that we don't like being unique; we don't like being different. The fact is, we live in a world of conformity. This is particularly obvious among our young people. A new fad in dress or style comes long and every one feels he must conform. Remember when the blue-jean fad for girls came along? on leg was rolled to the knee and the other half-way to the knee. Why this was so I have never yet figured out, but everybody did it! But those who are a bit older should not laugh or someone will show them pictures of the youth of another day where all the boys wore bulging racoon coats and the girls all had their hair in buns over their ears!

But uniqueness in who and what you are is a gift of God. You and you alone can give

to the world, to humanity, that which lies within your particular and unique personality. There is, of course, a great Christian doctrine here. 'It is the faith that God is creator and that the lives of each one of us was directly and immediately created by God. God never acts haphazardly. God never acts without meaning or purpose. When God created you he knew what he was doing. He had a reason for creating, he had a plan in mind. Your uniqueness is god-given. Of all the people who have gone before you and of all those who follow you, there will never in all of God's creation be another just like you.

So, to be ourselves we ought to have a healthy appraisal of our weaknesses, of the things we can't do or be; we ought to have a healthy appraisal of our strengths, the things we can do or be; and in so doing we ought to remember that each of us is unique having a special contribution to make to the world that no other person can make. But this leads us to our final point which is this: In order to truly be ourselves, we must put ourselves--our uniqueness--at God's disposal. Do you remember how Jesus put it? "He who loses his life for my sake shall find it." Do you see? You can truly be yourself only when you put who and what you are at God's disposal. Do you remember the story of Isaiah in the Old Testament? Do you remember how he had a vision of God in the sanctuary of the Jewish temple? In response to that vision he found himself--he put himself at God's disposal, "Here am I, send me."

I think this is the whole point of our scripture for this morning. Remember how Jesus asked Peter three times, "do you love me?" But Peter looks at the apostle John and says, "Lord, what will happen to him?" That is, what about this fellow? Will he be like me or I like him? Will we have the same experiences, the same service? To this question Jesus responds, "What is that to you?" That is, he is himself and you ought not to worry about that--you ought to be yourself." Then Jesus adds, "Follow me." That is, commit who and what you are to me. Don't worry about the other fellow. Take your god-given uniqueness, your special talents and abilities, and use them in our behalf. Yes, follow me.

To play in God's big band, you have to know what instrument you can play and what instrument you can't play. And if you are just a piccolo player, you have to be willing to play. You see, God has in mind a perfect harmony and in the midst of the drama of history, in the midst of great events where you may seem small and insignificant, God still wants to hear the piccolo.

Whoever you are this morning, God does not ask you to be something you are not. He does not require of you to measure up to somebody else. No, God only asks you to play the piccolo in his big band--to take what you have, to put it at his disposal, and follow him. Yes, he only asks you to be yourself--to pay the piccolo in God's big band.