

Sermon for Sunday, June 24, 1979, 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

To me there is nothing more stirring than a big marching band striding down the street or across a football field with all instruments blaring fortissimo! In the mornings when I am dressing, there is one particular radio station I usually listen to. And do you know why? Because a part of their format each day is to play a rousing march. Well, I like that!

If you could play an instrument in a big brass band, which one would you choose? Would you like to pound the big brass drum? Would it be the slide trombone? Would it be the big-mouthed, shiny tuba? (I always thought I'd like to play that if somebody else would carry it for me!) Or would you like to be the one who crashed the cymbals together?

So here we are, marching along in life's big band, and most of us would like to play the big flashy, loud instruments that get the attention. But do you know what? Most of us are just piccolo players. There are ten talent people who beat the big drum and five talent people who play the tuba, but us one talent people are mostly piccolo players! But let me tell you something: God expects one talent people to produce with what they have. Do you remember that parable Jesus told about the master who gave his three servants various amounts of money? And yet he condemned the person given only one talent--not because he had only one, but because he didn't use what he had. And do you know what that means? It means God expects to hear the piccolo.

Sir Michael Costa, the 19th Century Italian conductor and composer, is reported once to have 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. Maybe he thought the piccolo didn't count for much. Yet the conductor missed it. He missed it because it added that final touch to the perfect harmony he was trying to achieve. So with God! The great conductor of the symphony of life has a perfect harmony in mind and he expects to hear the piccolo.

Sometimes we piccolo players try to play the wrong instrument. I know a young lady whose father was greatly disappointed when she was born and wasn't a boy. He wanted a son to follow in his law practice. Well, she tried hard to be what her father wanted and when she graduated from college she entered law school. 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.

Do you ever wonder what instrument you ought to be playing? At the office we play one role, at home we are another person, at a party we are someone entirely different. 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 church I am the reliable worker everybody can count on; in the PTA I am the one they call on when they want something done." "Dr. Jumper," she said, with a look of despair, "Can you tell me who I really am?" Well, I can empathize with that. As a minister I frequently find myself playing certain roles simply because in a particular situation I know that is what is expected of me. Do you do that?

Most of us do. So, how can I be myself? How can I play the instrument God means for me to play, how can I be the person God meant for me to be--indeed, how can I be myself?

One of the first steps in learning to be ourselves, to find the instrument we play, 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 deficiencies while at the same time we magnify and enlarge the talents and abilities of others. We get to watching someone play the big bass drum with great skill and because we can we develop a sense of inferiority and a crushing sense of insecurity.

For example, daydreaming or fantasy is one way of escaping our sense of inadequacy, our limitations. Fantasy 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, he escapes from reality by imagining an exciting life in his mind. He is a race car driver taking great risks to win the race; he is a soldier going on some impossible mission. Unfortunately for Walter, the harsh voice of his wife always jerks him back to reality. But the fact is, a person who is evaluating his weaknesses in an unhealthy manner and escaping from them, will more and more be unable to tell where the imagined world leaves off and the real world begins.

Or take alcohol--or any chemical dependency--a person uses these when he has evaluated himself in an unhealthy manner and is seeking to escape reality in a way that is destructive. But the person who is looking at his limitations and weaknesses in a healthy way is seeing them as they are. He is accepting the facts of his limitations and imperfections. You see, the ugly girl can never be as attractive as possible if she won't try. The poor student can never use what brains he does have if he won't study because he can't make "A's". The salesman who refuses to make calls because he can't win the district sales contest will never make a sale. On the other hand, a person who realistically appraises his weaknesses will say, "I wish I had more to work with, but this seems to be all I have. I will take what I have and see what I can do with it." Now, that is healthy. That 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 finding our instrument in God's big band is to have a healthy appraisal of our strong points. I know a lady who is as plain as can be with a nose three sizes too large. Yet she has some positive qualities. She knows how 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. In college she was voted a campus favorite and ended up marrying the most popular and best looking boy on campus. She didn't dwell on her weaknesses, but concentrated on her strengths.

Sometimes we feel we have no strong points, no abilities. We are so crushed down by our own tragedies and failures and weaknesses that we will not even try. Unfortunately, our best can't come out unless we emphasize what we can do. For example, Dr. Edward Trudeau as a young doctor contracted tuberculosis and was sent to the mountains where he expected to die. But as he lay in bed he had a great vision of a hospital where he could care for people suffering like himself. Flat on his back he used the one ability he still had, his medical knowledge. From his bed he began to examine other TB patients not as ill as himself. He began to get better and soon was raising money. He worked until his dream became the great sanatorium at Saranac. By emphasizing what he could do, rather than pitying himself for what he couldn't, he turned a sick and dying young doctor into a

physician of world-wide fame. You see, in some mysterious way, our spiritual, mental, and physical health are all interrelated. By doing what he could, Dr. Trudeau was giving himself total health.

So, to be ourselves--to find the instrument God wants us to play--we must have a healthy appraisal of our weaknesses and a healthy appraisal of our strong points. In my church in Lubbock, Texas, I have a dear friend who has little leadership ability. Yet, Sunday after Sunday he stands at the door of the sanctuary passing out bulletins, welcoming visitors, greeting members, saying a word of friendly welcome or giving a lavish compliment to some middle-aged lady. He is the best loved member of his church and they say of him that the doors of the church couldn't open on Sunday without him. By emphasizing what he can do, he is making a significant contribution to the life of his church.

The third step in finding your instrument, in discovering yourself, is to recognize and appreciate your uniqueness. It is an amazing world we live in. We are told that no two snow flakes are exactly alike. No two of us even have identical fingerprints. Yet, the most amazing thing of all is that we don't like being different.

The fact is, we live in a world of conformity. Do you remember back in the fifties when girls first began to wear blue jeans? They all rolled one leg up to the knee and the other half-way up the leg. Why in the world they did that I have never figured out, but they all did it! And in case some of you older people start snickering in a superior way, I would remind you of boys all in racoon coats and girls with their hair in buns over their ears!

But uniqueness in who and what you are is a gift from 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 the life of each of us was directly and immediately created by God. Your existence is no accident. And God who created you never acts without meaning or purpose. When God made you, he had a plan for your life. You are a unique and indispensable piece of what God has in mind and your life counts. Nobody else--only you--can fulfill the unique and special role that God had in mind when he made you.

Well, I don't know about you, but to me that is exciting! It is exciting to know that your life and my life are no accident, but we were made by a God who had a plan in mind for us and our lives have meaning and purpose.

Then, the fourth step in finding your instrument and playing in God's big band is this: to truly be yourself, you have to take who and what you are and put yourself at God's disposal. Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "He who loses his life for my sake shall find it." Does that make sense to you? You can fulfill yourself only when you put yourself at God's disposal. Do you remember the story of Isaiah in the Old Testament? He went to the temple in a time of great national crisis and he heard God saying, "Whom shall we send and who will go for us?" Isaiah responded to that vision and put himself at God's disposal. He said, "Here am I. Send me." And in that act he found himself. He found the unique place God had for him, he found his spot in God's big band.

Isn't that the whole point of our scripture this morning? Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" But Peter looks over at the apostle John and he asks, "Lord, what will happen to him?" That is, what about this fellow? Will he get to play the drum, or will I? To this question Jesus responds, "what is that to you?" That is, get your eyes off the other person. Look at yourself. Be who and what God made you to be. And then Jesus added, "Follow me." That is, commit who and what

God made you to be. And then Jesus added, "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 put them at my disposal. Yes, follow me.

Well, that's what God wants us to do. 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--as most of us are--still God wants you 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 to yourself to be small and insignificant and of no consequence, God has in mind a perfect harmony and he needs to hear the piccolo.

Whoever you are this morning, God does not require that you be something you are not. No, he only asks that you take what you have, put it at his disposal, and follow him. He only requires that you be yourself--the unique and special person he created to fill the place that only you can fill in his great plan--even if means that you are only a piccolo player in God's big band.

The fact is, we live in a world of confusion. Do you remember back in the Bible when first began to wear blue jeans? They all rolled one day up to the top and the other half-way up the leg. Why in the world they did that I have never figured out, but they all did it! And in case some of you object people started wondering in a superior way, I would remind you of boys all in school could and girls with their hair in buns over their ears!

But uniqueness is who and what you are as a gift from God. You and you alone! Give to the world, to humanity, that which lies within your own heart and mind. It is your personality. There is, of course, a great Creator, a great God, who created us, but He created each of us as we are, and He created us with a purpose. And God who created you never acts without meaning. When God made you, he had a plan for your life. You are a unique person. And God has in mind and your life counts. He has a special place for you in His plan. He has a special role that he had in mind when he made you.

Well, I don't know about you, but to me that is exciting! It is exciting to know that your life and my life are no accident, but were made by a God who has a plan in mind for us and our lives have meaning and purpose.

Then, the fourth step in finding your leadership and playing in God's big band is that to truly be yourself, you have to take what you are and put your gifts at God's disposal. Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "He who loves his life for my sake shall find it." Does that make sense to you? You can believe yourself only when you put yourself at God's disposal. Do you remember the story of Isaiah in the Old Testament? He went to the temple in a time of great peace and he heard God say, "Whom shall we send and who will go for us?" He responded to that vision and put himself at God's disposal. He said, "Here I am, Lord." And in that act he found himself. He found the unique place God had for him, he found his spot in God's big band.

Isn't that the whole point of our scripture this morning? "These things I have said to you, that you love me," but Peter looks over at the apostle John and he says, "Lord, what will happen to me?" That is, what about this fellow? Will he get to play the drum, or will it be this question mark? Look at yourself. As who and what are you? What are you? And then Jesus added, "Follow me." That is, commit who and what