Good morning.

My name is Cathy McSwain. I’m originally from Texas, and my daughters and I lived in many states and Japan before moving to MA in 2009. -We found St. Paul’s about 10 years ago, and I am forever grateful for this beautiful community of people-- my church family-- which has been a blessing to us throughout the years. I stand in front of you today, hopeful that my words will serve this community well.

But before I get started, I want to tell you how I got here—because I’m someone who really prefers to work behind the scenes.

Back in March of this year, my dad had a very difficult heart surgery, so I went home to Texas, and my mom and I tried our best to take care of him for 2 weeks at home. His condition has since improved, but as I was flying back to MA, exhausted, relieved, grateful for his healing and grateful that I had taken that opportunity to be with my parents, I also had a very clear realization --- **life on earth is finite**. And I promised myself that I was going to start living life with more intention, more joy, and start saying “yes” to more opportunities to fully participate in life. And less than 12 hours later, I received an email from Ron Presti inviting me to speak today.

**As I often say, and sincerely believe, God provides.**

So here I am 6 months later, and I have thought a lot about what St. Paul’s means to me, what I wish and pray for all of you, and how I might encourage the support of this community. And here is the message I’d like to share:

**Live with Joy and Give with Joy.**

Some may wonder…How can we be joyful when there is so much suffering, so many losses, social isolation, disruption of our lives, social and political unrest, anxiety about our country and our planet, our own unspoken personal pain, disappointments, and challenges?

**How can we live and give with joy?**

I believe that we can live joy because:

**We have faith in God,**

**We believe in God’s love,**

**We believe in the goodness in humanity and the world around us,**

**We understand that God wants us to be happy, and**

**We have this loving community here at St Paul’s.**

But even if we believe all of this, how do we find joy in our daily lives? I find an answer in one of my favorite bible verses: **This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118: 24.** I’ve always loved this verse because it reminds me to focus on what God has given us and what I can control—my thoughts, my energy, my heart, my decision to rejoice. I’m not saying I always feel such focus and optimism, but I’m telling you that I’m trying—trying to focus on the joys and blessings in each day.

**And here’s what I’ve found too--the more we look for something, the more likely we are to find it.**

I’m not saying we should ignore the pain and suffering of people and communities around us. We should absolutely be aware, and we should act with compassion, empathy, and dedication to relieve suffering and seek justice.

**But I believe that daily, we should also recognize and celebrate the beauty of life, God’s love and goodness, and the blessings around us.**

Yes, there is illness—but there are also beautiful people who work to heal, relieve the suffering, and provide comfort, whether it is in hospitals or in communities welcoming new immigrants. Yes, our planet is changing, but there is beauty and strength in nature’s adaptation and resilience, and our efforts to protect it. Yes, there is crime and injustice, but there are also people coming together to love each other and solve problems.

And what about when we face our own difficult times?

As **Job’s life teaches us**, I think **we must all recognize and accept that life is hard and there will always be challenges**.

It took me a while to accept this lesson in my own reality. I used to think that if I lived a good life, I would always have goodness. I liked the control I thought I had in my naïve equation for life. But with age, experience, and wisdom, like Job, I have realized that suffering and disappointment is part of the human experience. Sometimes it is an opportunity for me to learn and grow, and sometimes it is an opportunity to have faith, learn compassion for others’ suffering, and challenge myself to find goodness.

**So if we recognize that we don’t have control over everything that happens in our lives, how can we find peace and happiness and even joy?**

Once again, we need to remain focused on what we can control…our thoughts, our beliefs, our work, our faith –**our** **belief** **that God provides**. And like the lesson of **Job** today, even though we may suffer, we must also remember that we will continue to be blessed. **For me personally, when I look closely, I’ve found that each day presents itself to me with opportunities for joy**.

In its most basic form, I find joy in waking up and realizing I have been blessed with another day. I find joy when I take time to appreciate the gift of a sunrise or sunset, listen for birds singing, watch flowers grow or leaves turning beautiful colors in the fall. Sure these same blessings can also be a challenge—that sunrise, maybe it’s too early. A birds’ enthusiastic song might wake us up. An early sunset--maybe it’s too dark. But if we change our perspective, we might also see the beauty in them too.

What about those falling leaves?—yes, they can be a lot of work or expense. But it is up to us to look at the events in our lives and find goodness, and joy, in them. For example, yesterday, as I was raking 14 bags of leaves, I asked myself directly…**Is there joy in raking leaves**? And even though I knew my back would be sore today, I looked for joy, and I found it. I looked around my backyard and recognized how blessed I am to have a place to live with beautiful trees. I looked up at the sky and felt the warmth of the sun. I honored and gave thanks for my healthy body that helps me accomplish physical tasks. And I was grateful for the quiet time outside that offered me an opportunity to think and reflect.

I understand that sometimes, during quiet times and times of solitude, it can be even more challenging. So it’s then when I find joy in bible verses that reach me in ways I wasn’t expecting, in quiet meditation and prayer, and in music. Sometimes I find joy in the simple awareness and appreciation of the comfort of a hot shower or a warm blanket. Although the girls are away now at college, and our lives have changed, I find joy in the memories we’ve had and in seeing them create their own beautiful lives.

There are some days, where the world feels very chaotic, and I have to slow down, turn off the outside noise of the radio and tv and social media, and speak to God, and ask for help to find peace and to find the blessings in the day. But if I look hard enough, it is always there.

As a Christian, I am also reminded that I need to share, to become part of the joy in the world—by showing kindness to others, such as patience with the grocery store clerk or yes, even other drivers. The world is hungry for kindness.

But I recognize it’s not a mission for me to walk or give alone, and I am blessed to have a community at St. Paul’s. Because St. Paul’s is exactly as the Collect states—it is a place of welcome, comfort, challenge, and strength.

St. Paul’s has been my spiritual foundation and community for many years. I**n times of darkness, in times of celebration with the girls, in times when we have wanted and needed a place to direct our love and attention**-- through my work with the Advent Fair or teaching yoga on Tuesday nights or the girls’ work with the Appalachian Service Project or sharing their music-- **this church family has been a community of people that welcomed the girls and me with open arms, kindness, love, and enthusiasm.** This community has also showed me God’s love through your words and actions, and given us a chance to share God’s love and to serve others.

**How does St. Paul’s do this?**

First of all, we are blessed to have Chris and Rachel here to guide us. They lead us with their wisdom, love and kindness, not just in our church services, but also in their relationships with us. We also have dedicated vestry leaders that serve to focus and guide our church on its mission. And if you aren’t already aware of all of the programs and opportunities St. Paul’s offers so that you can join this community, become more connected with us and seek joy, there are so ways to say “yes” and participate in life here—such as: Sunday services and coffee hours, -women’s breakfasts, men’s breakfasts, newcomers breakfasts, the middle school group, the high school school group, Kairos Sunday school, adult education, -church clean up weekend, pancake supper, the Advent Fair, the children’s Christmas pageant, and the Thrift Sale, just to name a few.

And so during this stewardship season, I ask you live your lives with Joy, and I also ask you to **give with joy**, and join us in supporting the mission of this church, which spreads God’s word, love, and compassion.

I understand that there are many things that demand our focus and our attention these days, and there are also so many things that seem to compete for our financial resources too. And while many expenses are necessary, I know in my own life, some things are simply distractions that we hope will make us feel better, and that take us farther away from living our best lives and finding our joy, our purpose, our peace.

So when you are considering your financial pledge to support St. Paul’s and our mission, I hope that you try to shift your perspective and see your financial pledge to this community, **not as a burden, but** as **an opportunity-- to share God’s love and God’s work**. Some of us may wonder about the amount of our gifts, and I once again ask you to change your perspective, and as this line from the responsorial psalm today so beautifully said, **“Look upon him and be radiant, and let not your faces be ashamed.”** Please do not feel guilt or shame that your gift may be too small—but look up with radiance, gratitude, and joy—knowing that all of your support is needed and appreciated, and your precious resources will be used to honor God and the mission of this church, to provide community, comfort, and support, and to spread God’s message of love.

At the end of the service today, with the musical gifts of Michael and the choir, we will be singing Ode to Joy.

**I pray that you will all carry those words with you as you go, that you may all continue to live and give with joy, filled with awareness of God’s love, the blessings around us, and the blessing of our community at St. Paul’s.**