

“The Return of Pumpkin Spice”
October 19, 2025

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
II Thessalonians 2:13-17

A few weeks ago, Chris Nakelski said “You should preach that “Pumpkin Spice” sermon again!

That took me by surprise because most people don’t seem to remember sermons that I preached nine years ago. And, really, most people don’t ask me to preach a sermon *again*.

If you weren’t here nine years ago—or don’t remember each and every sermon from the past decade—I did preach a “Pumpkin Spice” sermon in 2016, but I am not “repreaching” it this morning. This is more like a sequel: “The Return of Pumpkin Spice.”

And it has returned, hasn’t it. Back in August and September, I thought that we had perhaps reached peak pumpkin spice a few years ago. The frenzy seemed to have died down.

But once again pumpkin spice is everywhere.

Since talking with Chris, I’ve done some deep thinking about all of this and it seems to me that pumpkin spice does two things that might help us in the living of these days in general and in sharing our gifts in particular.

Pumpkin spice helps us recall the past.

And it makes us long for the future.

The smell and the taste of pumpkin spice triggers memories of fall.

A report out of Johns Hopkins says that those notes of cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger trigger deeply rooted cozy memories of autumn. Jason Fischer, an assistant professor psychological and brain sciences, tells us that: “Pumpkin spice aromas emerge in the fall in shops and cafes, coinciding with the arrival of colorful leaves, family gatherings, and back-to-school bustle. The association that the smell has with the season in our memories allows it to powerfully evoke the refreshing feelings of fall.”

Smells can tap memories more powerfully than any of the other senses.

And certain memories are of great import. So, the early Christians in Thessalonica were encouraged: “Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught.”

Memory is one of things that holds our congregation together. Each fall in our congregation, we remember our deep tradition of generous giving, so that we can stand firm in it and hold fast to it.

Generosity is a defining characteristic of this congregation. People here sense that generosity—in how we give, in how we act—gives us the opportunity to grow in faith and to grow in human character. We share a joyful spirit of giving—a giving of time, a sharing of abilities, and, yes, a joyful giving of money.

It's not the case everywhere, but our congregation actually seems to welcome it when we are challenged to increased generosity.

When we talk about stewardship in new member classes, the question often comes up: "How much should I give?"—how many dollars, what percentage of my income? I usually tell people: "Just be prepared to give more than you expect." That's what people tell me happened when they joined this church. We like what's going on here. We like what we are doing. We are grateful. And so, we give—more than we expected to give.

As I have before, I encourage you to think about how you learned to be generous. Who taught you?

Perhaps a family member helped you learn how to give. Maybe you had parents or grandparents who were generous with their time or their abilities or their money whose example showed you a path to follow.

Maybe you learned from a friend the importance of giving for living.

It might be that you learned to be generous from someone in this congregation or another one. A friend once told how, when he was a young adult and a new member in a church, two older members took him aside and told him, "We want you to know our theory of giving. Give first and you never miss what you don't have." It worked for him as he prospered and shared for decades to come.

Or maybe you were self-taught—learning to be generous simply by giving and experiencing the joy that came with that.

"Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught." When we have learned generosity and have practiced generosity it seems to stay with us.

All of us have learned—either here or earlier in life—the *joy* of sharing. Who taught you that? Give thanks for them, for they gave you a very valuable gift.

And as you remember and give thanks, keep in mind that young people are not deaf or blind to all the messages sent about *having*, whether in the comment of a friend or the words of a television ad or the great number of posts on social media. The messages are everywhere. In the face of this we recognize that our values and the commitments of this congregation need to be as much a part of the fabric of the lives of children and youth as the values of our consumer culture.

And I should be clear that through our program of Christian education, our values and our sense of generosity is being handed on to them. For years now, they have been supporting the work of the Heifer Project, purchasing scores of animals and helping scores of people.

We can give thanks that the children and youth of this congregation are learning and showing that liberality, generosity, and respect for the value of each person characterize who we are as God's people in this place. We who have learned to be generous have the responsibility—I might say we have the *calling*—to share this tradition with others.

Recall those pumpkin spice memories of generosity.

And let your memories of sharing move you toward the future.

There are some who long for the return of pumpkin spice even in July and August. And some of us think, “Well, you’re kind of rushing it. But Jason Fischer, the assistant professor at Johns Hopkins, said of the pumpkin spice anticipation many feel: “We often long for the arrival of fall at the end of a hot summer, and our sense of smell can summon up the season early.” We long for the future. We let the smell and the taste bring on the autumn.

I, too, look forward to the fall. More than looking forward to pumpkin spice, I look forward to the opportunity to remind all of you generous givers to be grateful that we have among us the resources that we need.

Sharing our gifts keeps us looking to the future. It lifts our sights beyond whatever troubles us today so that we can shape new possibilities in our lives and in our world.

Remember the experience of Jeremiah.

With capital city of Jerusalem under siege by the Babylonians, Jeremiah, derided as an unpatriotic crank and a traitor, has been imprisoned.

At this unlikely time, when all seems lost, Jeremiah’s cousin offers to sell him some property—land that will soon be in Babylonian hands.

How would you respond to such an offer?

Jeremiah jumps at the opportunity. He does so because he looks toward the future. He has a vision of what is to come: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” In an inauspicious time, Jeremiah sees possibility.

This story of hope in difficult times tells us something about how we might use our money.

No, I’m not suggesting that you invest in dubious land deals.

But I want you to recognize that we give, we even give generously, because of our hope for what God is doing now and will do in the future. We give as a way of shaping what the future will be. We share our gifts as an investment in what is coming.

We don’t wait to be generous until all is well, until there are no problems. If we did, we would be a sad and penurious people.

We give, we give generously, because there are problems that need to be addressed, because the world is so troubled, because lives are troubled—and even now, especially now, we sense that our giving can make a difference in the life of the world and in our lives, shaping our future.

What a joy, then, to be part of that process of gathering the resources that allow us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, house the homeless, and repair the broken places. What a humbling privilege to be able to remind you of the new life that your giving brings to other people.

And I have no problem reminding you of the outstanding personnel that our congregation employs to manage our office, finances, and building, to enrich our worship with music and

singing, to nurture our children. You know their consistently high-quality work and their devotion to their calling in this place.

Certainly, the reasons for giving are almost as diverse as our membership.

Some give because that's simply a part of life in a congregation. As a member, as a friend, in choosing to be a part of this community you recognized that our covenant with each other includes financially supporting what we do. So you freely give your fair share—and more.

Some give in response to what you have received. Recognizing God as the generous giver of all things, you seek to be generous in turn. With a faith that affirms we are created in the image of God, you seek to reflect that image in your own giving. Your generosity is a response to the generosity of God. You give so that you might share in the work that God is doing in the world even now.

Some give because you understand giving as a spiritual exercise. That is, you recognize the surprising reality that each of us has a *need* to give, a *need* to respond to the free gifts of God by giving ourselves. Offering back to God a portion of what you have been given helps keep in perspective that very human desire for more and more and more.

And you give because you care about other people: theological students in South Africa, people rebuilding after natural disasters, men, women, and children looking for a meal at the Free Lunch Program or a place to sleep at Shelter House. You look for opportunities to show your compassion by giving.

We don't talk a lot about giving in the congregation. It's usually just an autumn, pumpkin spice kind of thing, because members and friends love this congregation and our mission and ministry and support our work with an astonishing generosity.

But it is good, in the fall, as the leaves turn, as the cooler days finally arrive so that pumpkin spice seems fitting, it is good to talk and think about giving.

So, here's what I want you to do:

Remembering what you have learned and the people who have taught you...

Remembering that we always have and always will live in difficult times...

Remembering that the living God is at work through this congregation to bring life and hope to others...

Give some thought to what you earn, what you save, what you give. That is, give some thought to your stewardship—your wise use of money. It's not all that scary. Take some time with it. Maybe talk about it with someone else.

Don't put this off. Do it this week. This week is a very good time.

Along with the members of our Stewardship Board, I invite you to give generously to support the ministry and mission of this congregation in the coming year. I invite you to share your gifts as a way of shaping our future.

As you give thoughtful consideration to the gifts you will share in 2026, reflect on what has been accomplished this year because of your giving. The compassion, caring, and community that we find here are inspiring. It's not like this in every congregation. Your generous pledge will enable us to continue strong programing in our church and to serve those in need in our community.

As one person said of pumpkin spice: "It's more than just a flavor. It's a way of life."

I don't know.

But I do know that generous sharing of all that we have received from a good and generous God is indeed a way of life. We are called to wise use of all that we have been given—the time that we all receive in the same measure, our diverse abilities, our very selves in all their individual wonder, and yes, our financial resources, our money.

Sharing our gifts is like pumpkin spice: It is a way of life.

It is a life-giving way of life.