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THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: JOY

Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9

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The English poet, William Wordsworth, had a special appreciation for nature. He found in nature a powerful beauty and a universal harmony. He found in nature a deep joy that sustained his life. In one poem, he is revisiting – after a five-year absence – a wild spot by the banks of a river. His memory of the beauty of that place had sustained him and compelled him to share his joy. He writes, “With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things.” (*Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*).

By joy, we see into the life of things. There is something irrepressible about joy. Divine joy compels us to live our lives based on what God is doing to save, heal, and redeem and not on the conditions of the world around us or even the difficulties we face. Joy enables us to face the troubles of our lives with a confident hope that God is at work in our sufferings to bring us to life. Sometimes we are far too preoccupied with our desire to be happy and not concerned enough about joy.

Happiness and joy are not the same thing. In Greek philosophy, happiness is a by-product of having good health, sufficient wealth, an honest reputation, a

purposeful activity, and meaningful relationships. No one would argue with this. We all want to be happy. There is something that is more important than happiness. This is joy. Joy comes like an unexpected gift from the Lord. Joy can fill our lives even when our health fails, our friends leave us in the lurch, our job runs out, our society cracks open, and our dreams collapse. The psalmist says, “Sorrow may last the night, but joy comes in the morning” (30:5). Joy can emerge amid sorrow, struggle, or pain. Joy can sustain us through all these things. Joy is irrepressible; joy connects us to the divine currents of the universe that lie at the center of life. Joy enables us to see into the life of things.

The first passage of scripture I learned as a child was Psalm 100. Through the years, the words “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing” have stuck with me. When I am feeling stressed or confused, these words float up from somewhere deep within me. When troubles seek to drive the joy from my life, I come back time and again to the words of the Psalm: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth”. It does not say only when I feel like it, have a spare moment, or when

everything is shipshape, but in all situations of life.

This Psalm gives us the reason to rejoice: God is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of God’s pasture. Even more than that, God is good. We trust in Jesus who called himself the Good Shepherd.

The Psalm is a call to worship. The 100th Psalm commands the whole creation to sing a joyful song of praise to God. We sing, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*. Through the music of the church we see into the life of things. Henry Ward Beecher, the first pastor of the church I served in Indianapolis, said that to sing is to pray twice. We sing to praise God. The purpose of our music is not entertainment, but the worship of God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us. We express our gratitude in music; we express our deepest longings and greatest needs to God through music; and we open our hearts through music to receive the Holy Spirit into our lives.

Many Christian traditions today have lost this sense of God-centered worship. Worship has disintegrated into little more than religious amusement or a “me-centered” diversion. Reformed worship is an offering to God. We sing to glorify God and to regain a true perspective on life. We are

not the center of all things. God is center. When we sing in all circumstances of life, the Holy Spirit slips in to plant the seed of unconquerable joy in our lives. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis, noted the connection between worshipful music and joy. "Music... will help dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibilities, and in times of care and sorrow, will keep a fountain of joy alive in you." What do we need when our times are troubled, and our lives are in crisis? We need the unshakable foundation of Jesus. We need prayer. We need worship. We need one another. In prayer, worship, and fellowship we meet Jesus who fills our hearts with joy in the face of all our troubles.

When Paul was in prison near the end of his life, he wrote to his friends in Philippi. They had shared life together; they had prayed, served, and worshiped together. Now they were sustaining one another through letters sent across many miles. Paul in prison has every reason to be miserable. From a human perspective, things are not going all that well for Paul. His fate is uncertain. He has known shipwreck, beatings, betrayal, deprivation. Yet, near the end of his letter, he offers a joyful word of praise: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice."

I once heard a minister speak on Paul's call to rejoice in the Lord.

His point was that we should rejoice because things were not that bad. He said we tend to dwell on the negative and overlook the positive. Well, that may be true. In that sanctuary on that day, there was a man who had recently been released from a psychiatric hospital; there was a woman with young children whose husband had been disabled in an accident; and the community was troubled by drugs, gangs, and violence.

Paul has something more in mind than a motivational speech about the power of positive thinking. Paul is no Pollyanna who denies the reality of troubles and sees only the bright side of things. Now don't get me wrong. It is good to develop a positive attitude; to put the negative into perspective. In fact, Paul himself calls the church to contemplate what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and praiseworthy. Paul wants us to discover something more than the undeniable benefits of having positive thoughts. He wants us to discover Jesus, the source and foundation of our joy.

Paul ends his words with the confident statement that "the God of peace will be with you." We are to approach God "in everything by prayer." In prayer, we meet Jesus. Prayer may begin as we pour out our souls in a thousand requests to God. Prayer may become a moment of silent communion with God in the same way that two close friends can sit

together perfectly connected to one another without saying a word. Through prayer, we learn to look at life through the eyes of faith. Through prayer, Paul learned to live in times of plenty and in times of want; he learned to be peaceful, whether he is hungry or well-fed. Later in the letter, Paul says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." He learned to live in Christ. When he looks at the world through the eyes of Jesus, everything – every threat, every trouble, every relationship, every hope, and every disappointment – is cast in a new light. He is set free from fear, anger, and bitterness. At the end he comes to know nothing but joy.

In his memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the Austrian Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl recounts his terrifying experience of suffering in a German concentration camp. One day he was digging a trench in the bitter cold. He writes:

The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces.... In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piecing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "Yes" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse

which stood on the horizon as if painted there... [and I thought to myself] the light shineth in the darkness. (p.40)

Even in a concentration camp, Frankl found an irrepressible joy amid his suffering that compelled him to persevere against all odds. What is joy? Joy is the human echo of the divine "Yes."

In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes joy as a kind of longing for God. Joy is always a gift and never a possession. Once we have experienced joy, we desire to know it again and again. He said that when we are lost in the woods, joy is like a signpost that points us in the way of God. When we are lost in situations and circumstances that overwhelm us, it is the often unexpected and surprising gift of joy that leads us back to God.

The son of a retired Presbyterian pastor shared with me some words his father wrote not long after the pastor's wife had died of a long illness from cancer. He wrote that cancer can take a lot of things from us. It can steal our health; it can rob our mobility; it can take our memory; it can even take our life; but it cannot steal our joy.

Where do you go when times are difficult? When you are troubled and anxious about your health, where do you find hope? When you are worried about one of your children, where do you find

peace? Where do you find the wisdom and courage to live today when so much conflict and violence infects our community? In our public life, we may take comfort in our constitution, public safety officers, justice system, and the freedom to dialogue, debate, and vote. In times of personal and public crisis, the personal support we receive and the public resources we have are not, in themselves, enough. We need something more. We need a stronger, unshakable foundation from which we can draw our strength and courage. As the hymn says, we need a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God; a place where all is joy and peace, near to the heart of God. We need the joy that enables us to see into the life of things. When we are lost, we need joy, the signpost in the woods that points us to God.