

## ***Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Joy***

Philippians 4:4-7

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
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As we continue our in-depth study of the fruit of the Spirit, today we come to the characteristic of joy. Joy, you would think, would be fairly easy to explain, because it is common to everyone who has experienced the transforming grace of God in our lives. It should be easy to explain, and yet I find that it is very hard to put my finger on what, exactly, joy is. One of the reasons for this is that joy something so intense, so deeply personal, that it is unique to each person. There are pretty simple definitions for the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit, but not joy. I've experienced joy, and I feel like I know joy when I see it. But I'm not sure I can readily explain it, because for each of us joy is deeply personal and unique.

Sometimes I experience joy when I hear the beautiful music from the choir. Sometimes I experience joy when I see the twinkle in someone's eyes. Sometimes I experience joy when I get a hug or a note of encouragement during a time when I'm feeling down. Sometimes I experience joy when a truth in Scripture comes alive in a new way for me, bringing me to one of those "Ah ha!" moments. Sometimes I experience joy when I see the sunshine reflecting off the snow-capped mountains. Sometimes I experience joy when I see an osprey soaring over the bay.

How about you—when do you experience joy?

C.S. Lewis described joy as "an unsatisfied desire which itself is more desirable than any other satisfaction." Will Willimon said that "Joy, real joy, is always reflexive, a spontaneous yet deep human outburst because something has happened.... It's a gift, a response to something that happens to you." Phillip Keller talks about joy as "the quickening influence of the Divine Presence permeating the entire person." Billy Graham says that "joy is the flag that flies above the palace when the King is in residence."

How do you describe joy? The bottom line is this: Joy is something that happens when we encounter God's love and grace and compassion. Joy is the experience of the presence of God. Rejoice in the Lord always, says Paul... The Lord is near.

The Lord is near. It is an awareness that God has come to us that enables us to have joy. If our core problem is that we are estranged from God because of our sinfulness, then it is indeed good news of great joy to know that the God from whom we have been separated comes to us with grace and love.

That joy is inextricably tied to our relationship with God is evident in the ways the word "joy" and "rejoice" are used in the New Testament. One of Paul's frequent refrains, as in this morning's lesson from Philippians, is "Rejoice *in the Lord*." It's not rejoicing at other things in life, even those things that are very positive and good; it is

rejoicing *in the Lord*, in the forgiveness we have received from God, in the assurance of God's faithfulness and steadfastness toward us, in the experience of God's care and compassion for us. We rejoice, *in the Lord*.

There's a brief account in the gospel according to Luke, in which Jesus has sent seventy people to proclaim good news and to offer healing in the surrounding towns. When they return from their mission journey, they are all excited about the signs and wonders they experienced. "Lord," they said to Jesus, "in your name even the demons submit to us!" Jesus affirms their experience, but then he adds this note: "do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the source of joy isn't in the spectacular things we witness or are able to do; the source of our joy is in our relationship with God, which God has made possible for us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

I discovered something the other day when I was reading about the Greek word for joy. The Greek word is *chará*. It is a word that arises out of the same root as the word which is translated as God's grace, *cháris*. According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, *cháris*, as God's grace, is what "characterizes the good news... [In Paul's writings] the basic thought [of *cháris*] is that of free giving. In view is not just a quality of God but its actualization at the cross and its proclamation in the gospel. We are saved by grace alone. Grace is shown to sinners, and grace is the totality of salvation that all believers have."<sup>2</sup>

*Chará*, joy, is possible only because *cháris*, God's grace, has touched our hearts. Grace is God's action toward us. Grace plants God's love into our hearts, granting us new life. The seed of grace in our heart bears the fruit of joy in our lives. Joy is what happens when God's grace takes root in our hearts.

There's a parable Jesus tells in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. It's only one verse, so let me share it with you now: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."<sup>3</sup> Here's how I interpret that: Discovering God's grace is something so amazing and so awesome that it is worth giving our all in order to receive it. Discovering God's grace issues in joyfully surrendering ourselves to God. Joy comes to us when our relationship with God is restored and renewed through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

I know, it sounds a little contradictory for me to say on one hand that joy only arises out of this new relationship we have with God through God's grace, and on the other hand to say that things like a baby's smile brings me joy, or an osprey soaring over the bay, or a mountain at sunset. But the truth is, all those other things bring me joy only because I experience them as expressions of God's love and glory.

Joy is different from happiness. Happiness is wrapped up in circumstances or things. But joy springs from God's presence in our lives, not from the circumstances

1 Luke 10:17, 20

2 Kittel, et. al., eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 1304

3 Matthew 13:44

themselves. The circumstances may be cause for happiness, or they may be cause for sorrow, or they may not move any emotion in us at all. But the presence of God in all circumstances allows joy to arise in our hearts, no matter what the circumstance.

It is ironic that in the ancient Hebrew, the portion of our Old Testament known as the Psalms was known as “The Praises.” I say it's ironic, because the largest category of psalms is known as the laments. And yet, the irony is true precisely because the people of God who cry out in the midst of suffering and persecution know that the suffering and persecution are not the defining words in their lives; instead, the presence of God, who is faithful and sovereign, becomes the defining reality and the source of joy, even in the midst of suffering and sorrow. “By bringing all their suffering into the presence of God, they were able to turn back to hope, praise, and joy, because of their unshakeable faith that God was sovereign and would never abandon them. That kind of joy can cope with pain [and any other circumstance], because it is the fruit of faith in the living God.”<sup>4</sup>

That's because God's presence in our lives is for our welfare and our good, not for our harm. There are some whose initial reaction at the notion of God's presence is to run and hide in fear, because they envision a wrathful God whose goal it is to smite all those who don't measure up to God's standards. If that is your perception of God, then certainly knowing that God is near and that God is with you is not going to bring you comfort or joy.

But the truth is, God is present to care and to provide and to guide. Phillip Keller, who worked as a farmer and a shepherd in the mission field around the world, says this about the nurturing presence of God as the source of our joy:

“This joy springs from the presence of God in a person's life... It is [God's] knowledge of me, his careful husbanding of the ground of my being, his concern for my welfare, his cultivation of my character, his constant presence in the garden of my little life – that guarantees joy.”<sup>5</sup>

You see, joy arises from the knowledge that God is intimately involved in our lives. There is no area of our lives where God is not involved, where God does not care. God doesn't come to us to cause us grief, or to burden us with guilt, but to set us free to live as God's children. The reason God may convict us of our sin is to let us know that God offers us forgiveness and new life in Christ.

There is another benefit of the joy we receive in our restored and renewed relationship with God – it is the joy of belonging to God's family, the covenant community of faith. “Christian believers,” as Christopher Wright points out, “no matter what their background or circumstances, get a whole new family through belonging to

4 Christopher J. H. Wright, Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness (InterVarsity Press, Kindle Edition), Kindle locations 579-585

5 Phillip Keller, A Gardener Looks at the Fruits of the Spirit, in Phillip Keller: The Inspirational Works (New York: Inspirational Press, 1993), p. 493.

Christ.”<sup>6</sup> There is something special about the sense of belonging that we have for one another in the church. It means that we have the right to care about what happens in your life. It means that you don't have to go it alone in your struggles, nor do you have to celebrate your gladness all by yourself. You have family.

Now, we're not perfect, and there are times when the Christian family is the source of pain. But that is the exception, not the norm. The truth is, the grace of God in our hearts brings us together in a way that no other common bond can bring us together. The grace of God enables us to love, to forgive, to care, and to nurture. Joy is the natural result of the grace of God operative in the life of the church.

In a few moments we will celebrate the sacrament of communion. In that sacrament, we are told the story of God's love for us – a love so great that the Divine Presence came and dwelt among us as Jesus Christ, taking our form and burden upon himself in order to redeem us. In the sacrament, you and I are reminded once again of the unfathomable measure of God's grace.

But here's the deal: the sacrament is not just an exercise in memory. It is also the declaration of the reality that God is with us now. He is with us, because he loves us, and he cares for us, and he offers us new life. It is because he is with us, right now, and always, that the words of Paul witness to the truth: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.

Rejoice, indeed.  
Amen.

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6 Wright, Kindle Locations 465-66.