



**“Rejoice!”**

**Scripture – Philippians 4:4-7**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, December 16, 2018**

May I share a moment of joy with you? A magical moment 15 years ago, just a few days before Christmas. Camilla and I were wrapping Christmas presents, the Messiah was playing in the background, the lights on our tree were glowing, and we were sipping eggnog – maybe eggnog plus!

The phone rang and when I answered, I discovered that it was the Pastor Nominating Committee from Westminster, saying they were extending a call to me to become the senior pastor of this church. It was a dream come true and I was so overwhelmed with emotion that for a few seconds I could not speak. After a few seconds of silence, someone on the other end said, “Are you still there?”

I managed to suppress the knot that had seized my throat and finally began to speak. Do you know what I said? I have no idea what I said! Somehow I conveyed, “Yes! I accept,” but I was so overwhelmed with joy that I cannot remember a single word I uttered. But I came to the best congregation on earth.

I can recall other moments of immense joy. The day Camilla and I were married. The days our children graduated. More recently, holding a grandchild just minutes after birth. Can you recall a moment in your life that was pure joy?

The third Sunday of Advent is known as “Gaudete” Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for “rejoice,” and in today’s lectionary reading, the Apostle Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Those who think of Christianity as sullen and no nonsense definitely need an injection of joy. Those who think of faith as rules to follow and devoid of laughter need a transfusion of jubilation.

Yet I still feel the urge to challenge Paul’s assertion. Rejoice? Definitely. We can point to wonderful moments when joy exploded in us like a geyser. But *always*? When I hear someone say always or never I take them to task. Always? I can think of several examples that do not conform to your rule.

Paul, rejoice always? What about when you are told to pack up your desk because you are no longer needed? What about when the chemotherapy wipes you out so badly you cannot stand? I can name a hundred situations when rejoicing would be the furthest thing from anyone’s mind.

So, what about Paul's declaration? Are his words merely the spiritual version of the overly simplistic: "Keep Your Sunny Side Up?" Worse, is Paul calling on us to fake it? To put on a chirpy face to mask the anguish in our soul?

In order to make sense of Paul's words, I think we must make a distinction between happiness and joy. To me, they are siblings but not identical twins. They are very closely related and often overlap. We can be happy and joyful simultaneously. But we can also have joy in our soul, even when life has slapped down our happiness.

Happiness is prompted by the circumstances of our lives, while joy is tied to the temperament of our soul. Happiness is the result of good fortune; joy is an aspect of our basic disposition. Happiness is celebrating the home team's victory, receiving an unexpected bonus, laughing at a joke, hitting a shot exactly as we had hoped.

Joy exudes from a deeper place within us. It is a component of our character. While happiness is dependent on something going right, joy is a feeling of well-being regardless of what is currently happening. Happiness is the elation we feel when life is good – our fundamental relationships are positive, the kids are doing well, the parents aren't grouchy, everyone is healthy, and we are succeeding at work or school. Life on the right path makes us happy. Joy, on the other hand, can sustain a confident outlook even when the bottom drops out.

Today's passage is a perfect example. When Paul penned these words to the Christians living in Philippi, he had not just won the lottery or been treated to a lavish feast or fallen in love. He was enduring harsh conditions in prison. Robbed of his freedom, unable to fulfill his calling of spreading the good news, and living with the uncertainty of his fate, Paul was definitely not happy. Yet, despite his miserable situation, Paul could say, "Rejoice in the Lord always." And then, as if anticipating the resistance to his declaration, he doubles down. He says, "Again I say, Rejoice!"

Paul is not delighted to be locked up and awaiting trial, but he expresses the serenity that is lodged in his soul. His relationship with God, his knowledge that he is loved regardless of his failures, and his belief that nothing can separate him from God, have combined to create in his inner being a feeling of shalom – which is not only peace, but a feeling of wholeness; a feeling of confidence that he is in harmony with the desires of God. Paul reveals this in today's brief passage. After calling on his fellow believers to maintain a spirit of joy, he says, "Let your gentleness be evident to everyone."

Gentleness is not a call to be wimpy, but to be kind, compassionate, empathetic; rather than harsh, insulting, and argumentative.

Paul says, "Do not be anxious." If anyone should be anxious, it would be someone sitting in prison facing the possibility of death. Yet, Paul counsels them not to be anxious, and then I think he may be revealing what has kept him from being distressed. He says, "By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." What kept Paul from going over the edge were prayer and a spirit of thanksgiving.

Prayer is not simply talking to God, but being with God – directing our attention away from our worries and focusing on the One who was, who is and who is to come. It is widening our focus from the small picture to the big picture and doing it with a spirit of gratitude. If you do that, Paul says "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds."

*The Book of Joy* reveals the friendly jousting and wisdom sharing when Archbishop Desmond Tutu visited the Dalai Lama on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Dalai Lama has been cut off from his people and forced to live in exile for over 50 years. Archbishop Tutu endured the oppression and violence of apartheid in South Africa. Both men have been well acquainted with great struggle and deep sorrow. And yet, they are two of the most joyful people in the world. What is their secret?

Together, they pondered these challenging questions: “How do we embrace the reality of our lives, deny nothing, but transcend the pain and suffering that is inescapable? (And) how can we be joyful in a world where there is so much suffering?”<sup>1</sup>

The first marker they laid down was to remember that “Suffering is inevitable, but how we respond to suffering is our choice.”<sup>2</sup>

Another gem of wisdom shared by Tutu was this: “Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive...as we discover more joy, we can have heartbreak without being broken.”<sup>3</sup>

The Dalai Lama makes a helpful distinction between what he calls **wise selfishness** and **foolish selfishness**. Foolish selfishness is when you are so self-centered that you think only of yourself. You evaluate every event by how it affects you and you alone. You have no regard for the impact it has on others. Wise selfishness is being aware that when you help others, it brings you joy. You find personal happiness and fulfillment when you do something kind or generous for others.

Think of those people whose child died from cancer or drug addiction or a car wreck. They suffered the most searing pain that a person can experience. But rather than never crawling out of their dark hole of depression, they put their energy into raising awareness so that someone else might be spared the pain they have endured. Their focus did not erase the grief of loss, but it revived an element of joy by focusing on how they could help others.

The Dalai Lama noted that one of the reasons that joy is elusive to so many people is because most people search for joy outside of themselves – “from money, power, a fancy car, and a big house. Most people never pay much attention to the ultimate source of (joy), which is inside, not outside.”<sup>4</sup>

Some of our greatest problems are the result of what is within us. How do you view strangers? Do you see most people as threats or potential friends? Do you care about what is going on in the life of others or are you entirely self-focused? Do you approach life as a competition where there will be winners and losers or do you believe that all of us will be better off when we work together for the common good? In some arenas—like business and sports—competition can inspire innovation and excellence. However, if you see every facet of life as a competition between winners and losers, you will become frustrated, angry, and lonely.

Recent research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky points to three factors that have the greatest influence on increasing our joy: reframing our situation more positively, choosing to be kind and generous, and focusing on gratitude.<sup>5</sup>

Without ever conducting sophisticated scientific studies, the Apostle Paul understood this and counseled others to take these measures. First, reframe your situation positively. Paul had a choice. He could do what most people would do. He could lament his situation and increase his anxiety. But he chose to rejoice because he knew that while he might be cut off from friends, he could never be cut off from God. Then, he encouraged the Philippians to exude kindness and generosity. Paul said, “Let your gentleness be evident to everyone.” And lastly, he reminded them of the importance of nurturing a heart of gratitude. He called on them to express their thanks, knowing that when we direct our thoughts to the things for which we can be grateful, it reduces the pain of loss.

Four years ago, the founding pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta was laid to rest a week before Christmas. At the memorial service, his son, Bryce, spoke for the family and said that one of the things they were going to miss the most was their father’s sense of humor. He told the story that just a few days before his father died, his sister was already at their father’s bedside and the two brothers were driving to the hospital. On their

way, the brothers agreed that they needed to have a difficult discussion with their father about next steps. They agreed that Bryce would initiate the conversation. The other brother said, “But, first, tell him we love him.”

They arrived at the hospital, went to his room and the children gathered around his bed. Their father had not spoken for a while. Bryce said, “Dad, there are some important things we need to talk about. But, first, we want to tell you how much we love you.”

Their father stirred and it was clear that he had something to say, so they all leaned in to hear him. And their father said, “Uh oh. That’s a bad sign!”<sup>6</sup> He maintained his wonderful sense of humor up to the end.

Even in the face of death, joy can shine through those who have nurtured the peace of God within their soul.

#### NOTES

1. The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, (New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 4 and 7.
2. Ibid., p.7.
3. Ibid., p.12.
4. Ibid., p. 31.
5. Ibid., p.49.
6. Pam Driesell, “Watching for Love to Be Born,” December 21, 2014.

### **Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson**

God of all creation — who ordered the swirling chaos and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who sculpted the mountains and filled the earth with good things — *you* hold all life in your hand.

We can scarcely believe that You —Lord of the cosmos — became flesh and lived among us! Yet, so great is your love for us that you entered into our weary world. We rejoice that the One-in-whom-your-fullness-dwells drew near to us as a babe in a manger, that we might know hope, peace, joy, and love.

During this Advent season, we wait for you to draw near to us again, and we watch for glimpses of your presence among us. We watch, O Lord, for the day when every war-torn land enjoys your peace, which surpasses all understanding. We watch for the day when joy takes deep root, and all creation sings your praise.

For many of us it is hard to await your coming with hope and joy, for there is so much that defies your vision for creation ... In this time of gathering darkness, when day fades quickly into night and the shadows of despair descend upon many, we seek your light in every corner of our world:

Send your hope upon those who are weighed down by injustice or weary from grief. Send your peace upon neighborhoods torn by violence and communities embroiled in conflict. Send your joy into hearts that are broken or lonely, and your love upon those in need of compassion. We lift up our mission partners who live and work among people who dwell in darkness, longing for your light to illumine their lives and their lands. We pray especially for our sisters and brothers in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the lead up to next Sunday’s election; may the leader they elect pursue justice, promote peace, and seek the wellbeing of all.

Advent God — as we watch and wait for the Messiah, fill each of us with your hope, your peace, your joy, and your love, that we might bear witness to the light of the world. We pray trusting that you are the one who wipes away every tear, who comes to set your people free. So, with the confidence of your children, we pray as Christ taught us: **Our Father ...**