



**"Dare We Speak of Joy?"**

**Scripture – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, December 17, 2023**

On the third Sunday of Advent, we strike a match to the pink candle of joy. But it gives me pause: If we embrace the candle of joy, might we be accused of being tone deaf to the suffering in our world? Children are still being killed in Gaza, and the birthplace of Jesus – the West Bank city of Bethlehem – has cancelled Christmas festivities. We light candles of lament for those perishing in the violence. At such a time as this, is it an affront to those in pain to also light a candle proclaiming joy and to sing hymns of joy?

Last year, Alyona Synenko was in Nairobi where she works for the International Committee of the Red Cross. She has spent thirteen years in areas of extreme conflict as the regional spokesperson for the Red Cross, and now she was having to grapple with the horror of war in her home country of Ukraine.

One day she received a call from her aunt who said that her first cousin was getting married. Most friends of the bride and groom had fled the country; the aunt called to see if there was any way she might come home for her cousin's wedding. She wrote about the story under the heading, "The Glow of a Wedding amid Bombs and Blackouts."

Alyona said that phone call had a profound impact on her. For the first time in months, the dread of uncertainty gave way to anticipating a future of hope. She hoped the glamour of dressing up and holding flowers would challenge the fear and despair of war. She wrote, "Beauty brings joy, and I want to claim the right to something unnecessary and pretty." She had never been very sentimental about weddings, but she started texting with her cousin about dresses, rings, and a cake.

She had to fly to Moldova, then cross the border on foot past tents set up for refugees. She found her hometown, Odessa, drained of life. But she also realized that weddings are the promise of a future, a public declaration of ongoing life. She bought the most beautiful shiny, flowing red dress she could find from a Ukrainian designer, saying, "At a time when making plans seems to be a luxury few Ukrainians can afford, someone in my family was willing to take that risk, to prove that life could not be reduced to stockpiling candles and pasta." She continued, "Wars create pain, uncertainty and fear, but

survivors can't live on pain and fear alone. So, in the midst of war, my cousin, the groom, and six family members witnessed the vows, celebrated amid beauty and joy, proving that we believe the future is worth thinking about, and that hope is contagious."

She went on to say, "What is truly terrifying is when you get so accustomed to being afraid that it makes you numb to being alive. Out loud, that day, we made promises to the future."<sup>1</sup>

We often imagine joy to be tied to the circumstances of our lives. If friends and loved ones are healthy, if our professional life or retirement is humming along smoothly, if our basic needs and more are covered, then joy is a natural outgrowth of the good life we are experiencing. However, today's reading from First Thessalonians is indicative of what we discover in a number of places in Scripture: joy is not tied to moments of happiness or pleasure.

While most dictionaries make little distinction between happiness and joy, I find it helpful to differentiate. To me, joy is something deeper. Joy not only produces a good feeling, but also a sense of well-being and serenity. Happiness is often short term while joy is longer lasting. Joy wells up within us when we work hard to accomplish a worthy goal. Joy is that warm feeling in our heart when we reconcile a fractured relationship. Joy is that contented feeling that our life has a purpose. Joy is that gratifying feeling in our soul when we are kind and generous.

The ancient city of Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was a center for worship of both Greek and Roman gods, including the imperial cult which named the Roman Emperor as "Lord" and "Son of God." Rome adopted a policy of religious tolerance. Citizens could worship the deity of their choosing, *as long as* they also bowed down to the emperor.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's letter to these early Christians is a letter of encouragement to lead lives that are pleasing to God and to give ultimate allegiance not to the Roman emperor, but to Christ. Thus, he was encouraging the followers of Jesus to remain faithful despite the possibility of persecution.

Understanding the dangerous context within which these Christians lived, it is all the more remarkable to read what Paul said to them. He wrote, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Most early Christians came from the ranks of the poor and many faced persecution. Paul makes it clear that more important than our actual circumstances is our basic orientation toward life. Joy is not predicated on good fortune. You probably know some people who have things fall their way continuously, yet are never satisfied and others rarely catch a break, yet remain grateful for the gift of life.

If you choose to be cynical, you can stack up plenty of evidence for despairing about the future. Loved ones die and so do we. Family can disappoint, friends can betray. Our country has so many problems that sometimes it appears to be a backwater nation that has yet to be civilized.

God neither determines the course of our lives nor the events of the world. We are free to make choices that lead us closer to God's realm or further away from it. God challenges us to lean into a new future

whose foundations are compassion, beauty, justice, and peace. God whispers in our depths of new possibilities for transforming our lives and transforming our world.

Joy is a multi-faceted experience. It is a cousin to happiness, but I believe it is far broader. Joy includes pleasure, amusement, exultation, serenity, gratitude, excitement, and wonder. And what is often at the base of joy is hope. That is why Paul could encourage people who lived in adverse situations to be joyful. Hope that following the path of Jesus would lead to a better day and hope that nothing in life – not even death itself – can separate us from God ignites joy.

The Scriptures speak of joy not simply when all is well, but chiefly when the bottom drops out and heartache is banging on the door. The light of Christ comes to people in all circumstances, but chiefly to those who walk in darkness.

Author, Nicole Cliffe asked Twitter: “What is the kindest thing you have witnessed?” She received hundreds of responses. Not too surprising. But one story in particular went viral.

A man named Joe responded with a story about a time when he was the manager of an LGBTQ bookstore. One unremarkable day while he was working, the phone rang. It was a call from a stranger who said that he was considering harming himself.

Joe panicked. This was a bookstore, not a crisis center. He could help you with top picks on the New York Times best seller list much easier than he could give you crisis advice.

But Joe assumed that as long as he could keep the person on the phone, he was safe, so Joe started talking. He started asking questions. He remained curious and compassionate. As he stayed on the phone, a line of customers, ready to purchase books began to form. As they stood there waiting to check out, they began to figure out the nature of Joe’s call.

After a while, a middle-aged woman came up to Joe, put her hand on his shoulder and gently said, “My turn.” Joe handed her the phone and she proceeded to spend the next several minutes talking to this stranger; telling this person that things would get better and that he was not alone. As she talked, a line began to form – not at the register, but at the phone. People began waiting in line to speak words of kindness to a total stranger who needed to be reminded that he was not alone and that there are people who care. Whoever it was that called that bookstore was fortunate that he found compassion on the other end of the line.<sup>3</sup> It gave him the will not to give in to despair, but to persevere until things turned brighter.

God wants us to be happy, to relish pleasures and to experience success. But even when life conspires against us, joy can take root in our soul. Joy is not blindness to the darkness that plagues our planet, but rather a defiant hope that when people show compassion a new dawn can break. My prayer for you is that despite any turmoil in your soul, you will experience the joy God wants for you.

#### NOTES

1. Agnes Norfleet quoting from Alyona Synenko, “The Glow of a Wedding Amid Bombs and Blackouts,” The New York Times, 11/24/22.
2. *The Discipleship Study Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.2010.
3. Tom Are, “The Community,” July 16, 2023.