

Rejoice in the Lord Always

Philippians 4:4-9 Psalm 126
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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About five months ago, in a sermon entitled, "An Invitation to Trust in God," I quoted from the 1988 pop song by Bobby McFerrin titled *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. I did this as a way to reflect upon the passage in Matthew 6 that states, "Do not worry about your life," and "Seek ye first the kingdom of God... and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6: 25, 33)

After reading the assigned lectionary Epistle Lesson from Philippians 4 earlier this week, with its famous lines, "Rejoice in the Lord always," and "Do not worry about anything," I decided to return to this theme of dealing with anxiety and sorrow and fear and pain in order to more fully experience joy in life.

This morning I would like to expand this to include not only experiencing joy in our personal lives, but also together in our church life.

Today's big question is: **How can we experience joy that lasts?** I am particularly mindful of how that applies to those (perhaps yourself) whose circumstances in life are difficult, including:

- those who are already feeling the affects of the current housing and financial crisis,
- those who are unemployed (or are afraid they soon may be),
- those who are dealing with strained relationship issues,
- those who are sad and grieving,
- those who are lonely and isolated,
- those who face persistent rejection,
- those in emotional or spiritual turmoil,
- those who are homeless, hungry, and suffering,
- and those who are ill, especially the terminally ill.

A few years back I found a very helpful article in the *Presbyterians Today* magazine (December 2000). It was entitled, "JOY: God's Unexpected Gift," written by Ben Campbell Johnson. He is a fairly recently retired Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, and of Christian Spirituality at Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. His approach to exploring the subject of joy begins this way:

After a rather long journey with Christ, I have discovered a few things [that joy] does *not* mean. When we are joyless it does not mean that God is displeased or angry with us. Neither does it mean

God is punishing us for our sins. And, most important, feeling a lack of joy does not mean God has forsaken us.

In addressing possible **contributors to joylessness** he includes the following. See if any ring true for you.

- False expectations.
- Confusing happiness with joy.
- Refusing to face our pain.
- Struggling with skewed relationships.
- Feeling haunted by things in our past.
- Suffering from clinical depression.
- Running away from conflict.

If any of these raise a red flag for you, perhaps that may help explain a lack of, or at least a reduced sense of joy in your life. Ben Campbell Johnson writes, "Most of these behaviors will clamp the pipeline of joy, and keep it from flowing freely into our lives. A personal inventory might reveal some of these hindrances to joy."

When was the last time you sat alone quietly and took a personal inventory of what's going on in your life, including what's going on emotionally and spiritually? Perhaps now is a good time - for what you discover may help lead you back to the path of joy!

I want to address one particular item in that list of hindrances to joy: **confusing happiness with joy**. Ben Campbell Johnson writes (and most psychologists agree):

Joy and happiness are not the same. Happiness seems to depend on our external circumstances. If our circumstances are pleasant, our needs are met, and we have the approval of family and friends, we generally feel happy with our lives.

But joy is different. It comes from within and does not depend on our circumstances. While we may work on or even clear up some of the things that rob us of joy, we cannot create our own joy. Joy has a gift-like quality. It appears in our lives as a consequence of growth or change or a special relationship with others and especially in our relationship with God.

In contrast to happiness, joy can overflow even if we are in bad circumstances. Even in difficult and trying circumstances that could never be called happiness, joy can overflow to nurture and sustain us. To put it another way, happiness is like a fair-weather friend who hangs around when circumstances are good but at the first sight of

pain, complexity or confusion quickly departs. Joy, on the other hand, has deeper roots.

The Apostle Paul includes joy in his list of the “fruit of the Spirit,” again reflecting its gift-like quality.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul uses the word “joy” or “rejoice” 17 times. And it’s important to remember that Paul was in prison and facing a capital offence when he wrote this letter. He had every reason to be unhappy, and perhaps he was. But still he wrote: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!” From this we learn that **joy is not dependent on the absence of sorrow and pain.**

We also learn this from an Old Testament passage that I can bet very few of you are familiar with. I say that because it’s from the prophet who wrote the book of Habakkuk. (Try finding that quickly in your Bible.) Chapter 3:17-19 speaks of joy in a strange and paradoxical manner:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.

The prophet begins by painting a remarkably bleak and depressing picture. Failure, rather than success, seems to be the order of the day. Yet, in the midst of that failure comes the declaration, “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.” **Note that joy is not unaware nor ignorant or of tragedy or hard times.** Rather, it is grounded in a profound awareness of both the delights and sorrows of life.

Being able to “rejoice in the Lord always,” is a divine gift that, as Catholic priest Henri Nouwen puts it, “does not leave us during illness, grief, oppression, or persecution. It does not depend on the circumstances of our lives, or even on our momentary feelings.”

The Rev. Dr. Benjamin Reaves wrote a few years ago, “**Joy that lasts is not primarily dependent on health, wealth, comfort, or general well-being, but on God.**” He continues, “Joy is a worldview, a perception of God’s reality that generates hope and endurance in affliction and temptation or ease and prosperity, because joy enables one to see beyond a particular event – good or bad – to the sovereign Lord who stands [with and beyond all these things.]”

So please take note that the Bible does not say to rejoice in all your circumstances in life. Rather, it says to “rejoice in the Lord.” Always! Henri Nouwen, in his 1994 book, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit*, entitled an entire chapter simply, “Joy.” He remarks:

Joy is essential to spiritual life... Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety, and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.

We do have a choice, not so much in regard to the circumstances of our life, but in regard to the way we respond to these circumstances.

All this is extremely important for us as a congregation as well as for each one of us individually and personally. Therefore, **I encourage you, and us together, to chose to respond to life in a spirit of joy.** Here, in fact, is a suggestion from Nouwen on how we can develop our capacity to choose for joy.

Maybe we could spend a moment at the end of each day and decide to remember that day - whatever may have happened - as a day to be grateful for.

In doing so, we increase our heart's capacity to choose for joy. And as our hearts become more joyful, we will become, without any special effort, a source of joy for others. Just as sadness begets sadness, so joy begets joy.

Yes, joy is indeed contagious. So let us share our joy with each other, and let us accept the joy others have to offer us. So even in the midst of our individual or church circumstances, let us "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!"

Amen.

Additional Resources:

Benjamin Reaves: "Joy...That Lasts!" Sermon preached November 14, 2004 on 30 Good Minutes.

William Loader: First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from Lectionary, Pentecost 21.