

Psalm 1
 John 15:1-11
 Galatians 5:22-23...

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
 Midway Presbyterian Church
 July 10, 2022

Cultivating Joy

Introduction to the Psalm

The first Psalm provides a gateway into the entire psalter, emphasizing that those who would worship God, must accept his covenant teachings. In the end, there are only two ways to live: by embracing God's instruction or by rejecting it. Listen to these words from Psalm 1...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we hear Jesus say that his purpose in instructing his followers about abiding in him and keeping his commandments is that his joy may be in them, and that their joy be complete. Listen to these words from John 15:1-11...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear again Paul's call to abandon a self-centered life and to enjoy the blessedness of a life lived in the Spirit. Thereby will we know and bear the fruits of the Spirit. Those fruits include the gift of joy. Listen to these words from Galatians 5:22-23...

Sermon

In our Gospel Lesson today Jesus declares,

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
 and that your joy may be complete.” (v. 11)

We would do well to cherish these words of our Lord. But some only think of discipleship as entering his way of life through a narrow gate and walking a straight path. In his commentary on John, William Barclay says that a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done more harm than its connection with black clothes

and long faces. The famous evangelist of the first two decades of the 20th century, Billy Sunday, once said, “If you have no joy, there’s a leak in your Christianity somewhere.” And Reuben Torey, the Congregational minister said, “There is more joy in Jesus in twenty-four hours than there is in the world in 365 days. I have tried them both.”

Words for *joy* occur in the New Testament 326 times. Of those, 131 of them are found in the ten letters written by the Apostle Paul. For Paul, Christianity is as much a religion of joy as it is of grace. Being saved by grace and reconciled with God results in the ability to, as Paul said in Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again rejoice” (4:4).

Christianity is a religion based on the premise that as followers of Christ we live in a personal relationship with him. Therefore, being united with Christ is the source of our joy. When Mary was pregnant with the soon-to-be-born Messiah, she went to see her cousin Elizabeth...and Elizabeth said, “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb (that is, John the Baptist) leaped for joy” (Lk.1:44). When Jesus was born, the angel announced his arrival by saying, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Lk. 2:10). And when the Magi learned of Jesus’ birth by seeing a star in the sky, we are told, “they were overjoyed” (Mt. 2:10).

The joy that Paul talks about as being the Fruit of the Spirit is more than just a positive attitude or a pleasant emotion. It is a joy that is holy and pure. It is a joy which rises above circumstances and focuses on the very character of God. Joy in the Lord enables us to enjoy all that God has given us. We can rejoice in family, food, and fellowship; a place to live; clothes to wear; clean water to drink. This kind of joy is distinctly different from simple happiness. Joy like this is possible even in the midst of sorrow and suffering.

No matter how hard the road we are faced to walk, we can know the joy of Christ. Remember that Jesus himself faced great hardship in his life. He knew what it was to be doubted; he knew what it was to be betrayed; he knew being beaten and spit upon, having a crown of thorns placed on his head; and yes, Jesus knew the horrible suffering of death upon a cross, just like the two thieves on either side of him. He was indeed in the words of Isaiah, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (53:3).”

But even so, Jesus knew joy in his faithfulness to the Heavenly Father. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews,

...who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (12:2b).

Commentator John MacArthur says that,

Despite the misunderstanding, the rejection, the hatred, and the pain He endured from men while incarnate among them, the Lord never lost His joy in the relationship He had with His Father. And that joy He gives to each of His followers. (*Galatians*, p. 166)

So how can we cultivate this joy that is a fruit of the Spirit? How can we acquire or develop this quality of joy that Christ would have us know? Let me suggest three things.

First, by nurturing a thankful heart. How many of our present-day problems might be solved if we developed the grace of a grateful heart. Husbands and wives...parents and children...churches...schools...our country. When was the last time you wrote a thank you note to someone or told someone how much you appreciated something, rather than just taking it for granted? This past Father's Day I received a card from a church member here at Midway wishing me a happy day and expressing appreciation for my ministry. It certainly warmed my heart.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from him the little things?

To practice gratitude can change a person's life. And it can also change the life of a church. Thankful people come to worship not just to "get something out of it," but to give thanks and praise to God. Stewardship is transformed from fundraising to the glad giving of cheerful souls. Mission work is no longer a duty Christ has laid upon us, but the work of grateful hands and warm hearts. Prayer includes not only intercessions and petitions, but also thanksgiving and praise.

Dr. A. J. Cronin was a British doctor who once told about a physician of his acquaintance who prescribed a "thank-you cure" for frustrated and emotionally disturbed patients. When a defeated patient came to the doctor and the doctor could find nothing physically wrong, he would prescribe for the patient to say thank you for six weeks when anyone did him or her a favor or showed a kindness. And according to Cronin, the physician had a good rate of cure. Finding a way to express thanksgiving helped to put these people on the road to recovery and well-being. A grateful heart can nurture health in us as well.

Norman Vincent Peale said:

Why is gratitude strengthening? Because it recharges the soul. Anyone who is grateful is focusing on what is good, and ultimately all good things come from God. This means that the thankful person is aligning himself with the most powerful force in the universe and is drawing strength from it.

Yes my friends, the attitude of gratitude can help us to cultivate the fruit of joy of Christ in our lives today.

Secondly, let us meditate upon God's Word. Our Old Testament lesson from Psalm 1 speaks of two ways of life. One is the path that sinners tread. And those who take it are like the

chaff that the wind drives away. They won't stand; they will perish. The other way is that of those who delight in and meditate on God's law. They are like trees planted by streams of water; they bear fruit. They prosper. And the Lord watches over their way. In that very first of the 150 psalms we hear that

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night. (1:1-2)

The psalmist echoes the words that God spoke to Joshua as he was succeeding Moses as the leader of Israel:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful (Joshua 1:8).

One of the things that stood out to me in the life of a former pastor here at Midway, my friend Mickey Rice, was that daily practice of reading and meditating upon God's Word. In the preface of his book, *Time with Father*, he states that after 45 years of ministry, "I find time with Father the most exciting part of the day." He also notes: "The failure of most to have time with Father is not because the desire is not there, but because the discipline is not there." Mickey had both the desire and the discipline. And it grounded and fueled his life in God and God's word. Which in turn blessed many, many people.

Gratitude, God's Word, and finally let me say that we will know joy as we engage in a work, a purpose, that is larger than ourselves. Psychology professor, Abraham Maslow, once said, "I have found that every person who was sincerely happy, radiantly alive, was living for a purpose or a cause beyond himself."

The Apostle Paul suffered many things, from beatings and imprisonments to shipwrecks and ultimately death. But he maintained a spirit of joy in all the circumstances in which he found himself. And he was able to do so because he was doing the work of God that he was called to do. He lived to serve Christ. And what really excited Paul was to have others join him in this work. As he said to the Philippians,

“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:4-5).

The Philippians had partnered with Paul to accomplish the work of God. This brought joy not only to Paul, but also to the Philippians.

You know, our lives are going to be used up in some way. So let us decide to use them by participating in God’s work, a purpose much bigger than ourselves. A purpose that will bring joy to our lives.

So, my friends, take this to heart: Christ wants his joy to be in us and our joy to be complete. He wants us to bear the fruit of joy, for ourselves and for others around us. But we need to cultivate the gift of joy. And three ways we can do that are by practicing gratitude, meditating upon his word, and engaging in the work of Christ’s kingdom, even as we look forward to the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.