

Rejoice Always? – 13 December 2020

“As Christians, joy is a way of seeing the God’s redemptive work in the world. In Greek, the word joy and the word grace share the same root...”

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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

“Rejoice Always?”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May that very God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and will do this.

John 1:6-8; 19-28 NRSV, emended

There was a man, whose name was John, sent from God. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. John himself was not the light; but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the religious leaders sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” John confessed, and did not deny it but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And then they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.”

Then they said to John, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah had said.

Now the questioners had been sent from the Pharisees, and they asked John: “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

In January - do you remember January? When the whole year spread before us with the hope that something could be different? I don't think this was the kind of different I had in mind. Anyway, in January, I printed up a little bullet point list from James Clear who is...I don't know he's like an internet person and blogs and talks and writes books. You know what I mean. Clear writes about habits and ideas. His book is called *Atomic Habits* and hit the bestseller list. Anyway, I printed this list and put it on my refrigerator. It began like this:

How to be Unhappy:

- stay inside all day
- move as little as possible
- spend more than you earn
- take yourself (and life) too seriously
- look for reasons why things won't work
- always consume, never contribute
- resent the lucky and successful
- never say hello first
- be unreliable

And then, he said, you invert it for happiness:

- get outside each day
- move: walk, exercise, dance
- spend less than you earn
- view life as play
- be the one who looks for solutions
- develop a bias to contribute and create
- learn from the lucky and successful
- be the first to say hello
- be reliable

That feels so true to me, though I'm not entirely sure he's talking about happy, like, the emotion. Because emotions are tricky. Some people point out that they come and they go, but they are not *us*. Others point out that even on a bad day we can *choose* to be happy. Honestly, I think the trouble is that we value positive emotions and devalue negative ones. It isn't wrong to want to be happy; it isn't wrong to want to be free from pain. The trouble comes when we forget that pain has as much to offer us as pleasure. I think Clear's recipe for happiness, though, isn't as much about the coming and going of emotion as it is about being receptive to whatever is being offered to us. It isn't so much how to be happy - to smile and laugh and feel good - but about something more like Joy. As Christians, joy is a way of seeing the God's redemptive work in the world.

In Greek, the word joy and the word grace share the same root, such that the word joy, in a way might mean something that, "gratitude for God's grace." In this way, joy kindles in us an appreciation for every gift that we have not made for ourselves. Frederick Buechner

writes, "Happiness is man-made—a happy home, a happy marriage, a happy relationship with our friends and within our jobs. We work for these things, and if we are careful and wise and lucky, we can usually achieve them. Happiness is one of the highest achievements of which we are capable, and when it is ours, we take credit for it, and properly so. But we never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that they are not man-made and that we are never really responsible for them. They come when they come. They are always sudden and quick and unrepeatable. The unspeakable joy sometimes of just being alive. The miracle sometimes of being just who we are with the blue sky and the green grass, the faces of our friends and the waves of the ocean, being just what they are. The joy of release, of being suddenly well when before we were sick, of being forgiven when before we were ashamed and afraid, of finding ourselves loved when we were lost and alone. The joy of love, which is the joy of the flesh as well as the spirit." You see what I mean? Joy isn't just feeling good. Joy is like getting a new pair of glasses by which you can see that the world is infused with God's grace. ELCA Pastor Mike Foss wrote a book on discipleship practices called *The Disciple's Joy* about practices we can cultivate that will aid our journey following Christ. He writes something similar, "The kingdom of heaven is served best by joy-filled Christians who, rather than simply endure life, have learned through faith to treasure life."

We leave our kids everyday telling them, "Do good. Be good." And they answer back with a line added when our big kid was in preschool, "Don't have a bad day." In some ways, the end of the letter to the Thessalonians - today's epistle - and, indeed, many of St. Paul's letters, are simple farewell instructions. Less, "Can you vacuum today?" And more, "Remember who you are." Interestingly, several of Paul's letters include the instruction to be joyful. Joy is the birthright of a Christian, not because it makes us feel better but because joy is about how we see each other and the world.

St. Paul, despite being often painted as a kind of somber guy, still writes a bit about joy. This community, he says, is his glory and joy. In another chapter, he says he is unable to thank God enough for all joy he feel because of the Thessalonians. The joy of this connection is woven throughout the letter. It is a letter about joy, but it is also a letter about grief. The Thessalonians believes that Jesus was going to return within their lifetimes, but members of their community had died. They were feeling a bit disconnected from one another and those who had died and from their faith. Therefore, as I read it, this instruction isn't to "cheer up," to "put on a happy face," but to see their loss through the eyes of faith.

I suppose even this sermon is starting to feel like an order to get an attitude adjustment. We have lost so much this year. Rejoice always? Yeah, right. Yet, the losses in the Thessalonian community shook their faith. They wondered, would God keep God's promises? And St. Paul says, yes. After his instructions he reminds him, "the one who calls us is faithful." Yesterday was my 10th anniversary of ordination, and that verse has been my theme - through heartache and conflict, at baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

The lives of God's faithful people have been the most powerful sermon to me because woven into their lives is the faithfulness of God, the heart of their joy.

I was introduced this week to a children's book called *The Mountain who Loved a Bird*. In the book a desolate mountain is visited, quite by happenstance, by a bird named Joy. The mountain pleads with her to stay, but, as there is no water or vegetation on the mountain, she cannot. But she does promise to name one of her daughters Joy and teach her to return, to sing to the mountain, and to continue this cycle. For a hundred years, birds return to the mountain, but they can never stay. Eventually, this breaks the mountain's heart and, from deep inside, a stream breaks out. The bird continues to return but the mountain grieves such that she cannot speak. One year, as the mountain grieves her loneliness, Joy brings a seed. Year after year, the mountain's grief waters the seed. Year after year, Joy brings more seeds. Soon, the mountain and its surrounding plain are covered in green. And, then, Joy comes to stay. The beauty of this book is the idea that Joy comes to stay because of the pain, loneliness, and grief of the mountain.

In John's gospel Jesus talks about joy - on the night of his betrayal. He instructs his disciples to love one another. And he says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." On the night of his betrayal, knowing what was to happen - at least as John tells it - Jesus talks about joy - joy as a way of understanding, joy as a gift.

Can we rejoice always during a pandemic? Can we rejoice always when the state in which we live is flirting with death and hospitalization statistics that are among the worst *in the world*? Well, if our expectation is that "rejoice always," means "move through the world unaffected by its pain" or "pretend to be happy when inside you're dying," if our expectation is that we will not grieve or that we will ignore the pain -- well, no. We cannot rejoice always in that way. But maybe... maybe we can rejoice always this season, to understand exactly what joy is to and for the world, what joy this season is all about: that Jesus came to the sorrowful, the suffering, for those in pain. The joy of this season isn't to lay aside our fear and grief. It is to name the truth that it is for these reasons that Christ came. That is what St. Paul tells the Thessalonians. Jesus came to raise the dead. And more: Jesus came to release the prisoners, to free us from oppression, to heal us and to bless us. Jesus came to grieve with us. To know our pain. Joy doesn't ignore this or bury this, rather, it watches for its redemption and transformation at the hands of the Savior whose joy was made complete in us.

Amen.