



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, life-Giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, welcome to Gaudete Sunday. Isn't this great? Don't we all love Gaudete Sunday? Yes? No? Bueller? Bill gave a little introduction at the start of the service, but if it's the first you've ever heard of this, if you're feeling a bit out of the loop, don't feel bad. I had made it through three years of seminary without ever actually hearing that word mentioned.

I had just started serving at the church where I was going to be placed after ordination, and it was the first week of Advent. And one of the vergers hands me a torch and says, "Chris, can you go out there and light the Advent wreath?" I said, sure. So I walked out there trying to look stately and poised in front of 200 people. Not sure you know exactly how to make my way through that chancel, wanting to make sure I didn't make a wrong turn.

Well, I made my way to the Advent wreath, got up the stairs, and staring at me is this kind of pale pink candle. Well, I had never seen a pink candle in Advent. And I just kind of thought to myself, well, you know, when in Rome, whatever. So that was the candle I lit. Oh my God, that wasn't the biggest church in the world, but they had a lot of vergers and they were on me like flies right after the service. "Chris, Chris, you lit the wrong candle! Don't you know Rose Sunday is the third week of Advent?"

So they were having a lot of fun, hazing, you know, the new guy. And not to be outdone, I quickly channeled my liturgics professor and I asked them, okay, okay, you got me, you got me, but can any of you tell me, what does this even mean? What does that pink candle symbolize? And sure enough, crickets. And they all kind of pull out their phones and start Googling it. And as Bill kind of mentioned at the front of the service, *Gaudete* is Latin for rejoice. And so it's also known as Rose Sunday. And it's kind of like a break from what is normally sort of a solemn and a quiet Advent, a sort of reflection and quiet anticipation. This is our chance to sort of say, hey, we're two weeks from Christmas. Let's rejoice. This is going to get fun here in a few weeks.

And you may have noticed that joy was in all of our readings. It was in the hymn that we just sang. Paul ends his letters to the Thessalonians with "Rejoice always." And when I came to Christchurch Cranbrook, I really wasn't surprised to see us

observing Gaudete Sunday because joy is a real theme here, isn't it? I have heard on more than a few occasions, Bill said it even this morning, joy is our birthright. In fact, finding joy is the first line of our mission statement. And to be clear, when we speak of joy, know that we're not talking about happiness. Happiness is great. Nothing wrong with it. I'm a big fan, but happiness is fleeting. Happiness comes from something outside of us, something going our way. An unpleasant or a pleasant, unexpected surprise, a fabulous vacation, finding that new iPhone under the Christmas tree.

Joy, on the other hand, joy cannot come to you. Joy can only come from you. Joy cannot come to you. It can only come from you. Joy is a state of being that arises from cultivating a kind of inner peace, from practicing compassion and generosity and forgiveness. It's the peace that passes all understanding as Jesus says. Which comes from a life increasingly lived for others, one that moves more and more deeply into the divine flow. And so joy is intertwined with faith because faith fuels our willingness to give ourselves to the world and to keep doing it even in the face of suffering and loss.

Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "Joy flows from the deep gladness of knowing without any hesitation that God's will for the world will outrun all of our troubles, all of our tribulations, even death itself." Joy comes when we ground our lives in the long game of God. In the sure and certain hope that nothing, nothing, nothing we have ever done, nothing we can ever do, nothing that the world could ever throw at us, nothing can separate us from the love and the mercy and the grace of God.

So if all this is true, you might be asking yourself, why then? Why doesn't it feel true for me? I come to church like everyone else. I was baptized. I even pray. Why am I so stressed out all the time? Why am I so anxious? Why do I worry about the future? Why do I spend so much time ruminating about the past? Why do I feel like I never measure up? Why do I feel like I'm always missing out? And that was just my list at 8:00 this morning, mind you. So yeah, joy is our birthright. Thank you, Jesus. It's an irrevocable gift from God, a fact of our birth, but it is also one that we must claim. We have to choose joy.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama spent a lot of time thinking about this, and they compare it to a muscle. It's something that we have to practice. It's something we have to exercise and develop because it is not our default mode. Our default mode, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-centeredness, self-preservation, self-protection, and all the dysfunctions and all the acting out, and all the ego and all the wonderful feelings of fear and doubt and insecurity that flow from them, that is our default mode.

So why the disconnect, I wonder? I've been reading some articles on neuroscience and psychology that maybe can help to explain it. It turns out that most likely as a

result of our evolution, our brains are wired first and foremost to keep us alive. And they're good at it. Despite being continually bombarded by countless stimuli, images, sounds, words, ideas, smells, all of it, our brains are experts at filtering it all out and focusing on the things that can kill us, on the things that can harm us, make us mad, sad, or scared.

And that focus is what psychologists call the negative attention bias. Have you heard that before? In other words, left to its own devices, our brain will automatically drift to negative possibilities, sensationalism, worst case scenarios like a magnet. And I always thought it was my lawyer side kind of working in overtime. But we all do it. We immediately identify with the thing we don't like. We quickly spot what seems scary or strange. We ask, can we really trust that person? We wonder what are they saying behind our back? We worry about those test results. We wonder, am I living up to my potential? Oh, and what did I just hear on the news? How many people died?

Now imagine that was your commute to work one day. Might you have also driven by some beautiful trees? Was the sun perhaps out? Was music playing? Were you sipping your favorite French roast? And did you notice any of that? Unless we are intentionally trying, we tend to miss out on the good stuff because our brains are wired for survival, not joy. And if that's not enough, as Bill pointed out last week, we have a social media digital information consumer industrial complex that long ago figured out how to exploit that very same attention bias and make lots of money doing so. And it's caused within all of us to develop a kind of more dismal and more distorted view of ourselves and the world.

So with all of that stacked against us, how can we nevertheless choose joy? How can we do, as Paul says, rejoice always? And if it sounds like I'm about to give you a bunch of pop psychology or trite self-help, turn that frown upside down, friends, this is true spiritual warfare. It is going on every day and it makes a difference in our lives and it gets worse as we get older. And there are countless practices. Reading scripture, praying the Psalms, contemplative prayer.

One that I've been trying lately is something I call turn the other cheek. Not sure where I heard that before, but I like the ring to it. Basically, when I find myself caught up in negative thoughts, worries, and judgments, I've stopped trying to fight them. I've stopped getting down on myself for having them. As Carl Jung said, what you resist persists. Instead, I simply try to catch myself. I try to be mindful of that moment enough to see them for what they are, just thoughts served up by a brain whose job is to generate them. And I have found that that simple act of becoming aware of my thoughts, noticing when I'm having them, creates just enough separation for me to see that they are not facts, they're not reality, and most importantly, they are not me. And they're not the person God made us to be.

And that leads me to what Paul is saying today. As we try to practice starving those negative thoughts of our time and attention, might we start to feed our brain with something positive. He says, practice gratitude. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, stop worrying about the future. Instead, look at all the ways God has blessed the present. How can we actively begin to see the blessings of the present? All the things we miss out on when we binge cable news and bury our heads in the phone and doom scroll the internet.

I started keeping a gratitude journal. Anyone else do that? A couple of you? Just 15 minutes a day, I write down what I'm grateful for. And I started with the easy stuff, you know, my health, my children, my husband, but I found as I continued it, I found myself naming smaller and smaller things, things I had never thought of. Things that I took for granted, people that I'd never noticed. It's the simplest of practices, just 15 minutes, but I've also noticed it started to spill out into the rest of my day, and I'm starting to find myself noticing more and more little gratitude moments in the most unexpected of places.

And it's led me to see how, how it might be that if we were to build such a gratitude habit as new neural pathways are developed, I could start to imagine how there might come a day when no matter what life throws at us, that we might actually be able to find ourselves giving thanks in all circumstances and rejoicing always, as Paul says.

I visited someone in the hospital once years ago, early in my ministry, who's about as close to being there, I think, as anyone I'd ever met. She was in her early sixties, lifelong Episcopalian, and facing a terminal illness. She was in a fair amount of pain. She had been forced to move out of her home. And to say goodbye to all the plans she had for her life, her retirement, chance to travel, years and years of being a grandmother. Her whole world, her whole future had been reduced down to that tiny hospital room.

And as I walked in, the first thing that hit me was this incredible presence about her. She had had this contentment, this sense of inner peace. While she was the one in the bed and the nurse was bending over her, it wasn't entirely clear who was caring for who. She called the nurse by name as if they were longtime friends. She asked about her family. She gave advice about being a single mom because she had been one, too. She knew about her daughter's recent soccer game and she wanted to see the pictures. Yes, she was sad. Yes, she was scared and disappointed, but she was far more interested – she gave way more of her attention and energy to delighting in the blessings of her life, and the blessings of the lives of anyone who came into her room, including me.

And it struck me in talking to her that this was probably how she lived. This wasn't a kind of deathbed conversion. This incredible graciousness and generosity of spirit had somehow become her default mode. It was who she was. She had found

her way into that divine flow, and indeed it flowed from an abiding faith that with God all would be well, all would be well. All manner of things would one day be well.

I wonder if this is what Jesus was talking about when we began this Advent season, when He warned us to stay awake, to stay alert. Perhaps that is how we ultimately choose joy. As we wait for the birth of Christ, may we remain alert to the countless second comings that happen all around us. May we too, stay awake and choose to look for Christ in the face of everyone we meet. And may we see him, may we see the one who comes to bring good news and great joy.

Amen.