



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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"Joy is a Birthright" - The Third Sunday after Pentecost - 6/21/2020

[Lesson for the Third Sunday after Pentecost](#)

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

We are going through an incredible time of tumult and a time of pandemic and a time of protest. And so it's a bit difficult to conjure up all of those images of joy that we might bring before you today. And part of that is complicated by the fact that we are living with these scriptures that are incredibly difficult.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Now, those are difficult words. Those are words that could fill us with a bit of terror. And so, as I was praying through what to say this Sunday, I found myself going deeper and deeper and deeper into that prayer space that you have to enter into to remember that God's joy is full and complete in us when we do what we are created to do.

In our collect today, it says that we have been set upon the foundation of God's loving kindness. And that loving kindness is an invitation to a life of joy. So as difficult as we might find ourselves today, going through some rough road, and as difficult and challenging as the future seems to us this day, as we are trying to counter and rebuild some resiliency to meet the challenges that are before us, the thing that we have to remember most with joy is that joy begins with relationship. Joy begins with connectivity. Joy begins in God and works its way into our lives when we are in a right relationship with God. And joy is something we have to, in some sense, choose. And that is what's running through all of our readings for today.

In our reading from Jeremiah, Jeremiah has to choose the joy of standing with God and discovering the incredible comfort of having God stand with him. And in our reading from Romans today, we have a kind of promise that if we are faithful to God, we will be responding to the faithfulness God has already shown us in Christ and therefore we will have the power to walk with newness of life.

And in our reading from Matthew, you have an incredible challenge by Jesus to choose the joy of following Him, which means a decision to take on some of the suffering that He Himself has taken on for our sake. And by following Jesus, we are returning into the love relationship that we have with God. And there is in those scriptures, the promise, but even the hairs of our head are counted and that God is watching over us just as God is looking over the sparrows, even though God loves us more than sparrows. For God's joy is in us truly.

And there are three things that I want you to see about joy today. Three things that are incredibly important for you and I to keep in mind as we try to reclaim and hold on to that birthright to joy that we have through Jesus. And the first is best introduced by telling you a short story.

The other day I was taking one of my monster walks, which I'm doing to somehow deal with being cooped up because of COVID-19. And as I was making my way through some streets, I found this little boy that had set up a lemonade stand right at the edge of the driveway. And he had made his own sign, he had a seat, a kind of chair right behind the table that he set up. He had the lemonade on the table. He had his little sister next to him and she was kind of holding onto a doll and waiting for this particular activity to pass. And he was just intent on opening up his business and trying to get some people to buy his lemonade.

And the minute I saw him, I suddenly remembered the moment in which I had done the same thing - and so many of us have done the same thing. I remember just so vividly that moment where I took the card table from the backroom, brought it down, set it up and put out the dining room chair and got the mix, the lemonade mix and made the mix in these plastic pitchers that seemed to be everywhere in the 1970s.

I remember making the sign and I remember pouring lemonade into the kind of wax paper cups that we used. And I remember that so vividly because I was so convinced that somehow this would be a roaring success and that I would have just hundreds of people coming and flocking to my lemonade stand. And I was a bit surprised when it was only a few people, but even so there was a kind of joy in the adventure of doing it.

And the minute I saw this little boy, I remembered not only that experience. I also remembered the lemonade that I sold, which was incredibly watery, having been made from mix. And I remember disappointing someone who had come up and said, is this fresh lemonade? And I said, well, I made it just about an hour ago, so I guess so? But what she meant was fresh squeezed, and I was serving mix, and there was an unsatisfied customer. But I also remember the taste of that lemonade. It had this kind of wateriness, and then you tasted the plastic of the pitcher. And there is this just tiny little hint at the end of dish soap.

And for some reason, all of those memories, those joyful memories came flooding back when I passed this little boy selling lemonade on the street, just the other day. And this brings me to my first point about joy, which is that joy is sometimes best revealed to us as a kind of longing, as a kind of hope and a kind of promise, a kind of line that draws us back to the things that fill us with true fulfillment in this life. The things that we have been placed on this earth to do, the things we have been created to do by our creator. Joy is a kind of longing for a relationship with God.

In 1955, C.S. Lewis wrote an incredible book called Surprised by Joy, and there he was pulling from a poem that was written by William Wordsworth in 1812. And Wordsworth wrote that line "surprised by joy" to identify the moment in which he suddenly realized that he had a joy that he wanted to share with his daughter who had died at three. And so Wordsworth speaks about that surprise of joy as a kind of longing for relationship and a kind of hope and resurrection.

And Lewis, when he pulls from "surprised by joy," that becomes the centerpiece of what he's trying to say about joy. He writes, joy is distinct not only from pleasure or happiness, but even from beauty, it must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing. Joy pulls us into relationships. Joy reminds us that we are created for more. Joy reminds us that we have a blessing in God by being in right relationship with God.

The second point I want you to see today is that joy is a mystery. Joy is an invitation into incredible fullness. And when we experience joy in our relationship with God, it's almost as if we are suddenly flooded with this recognition, this permeating feeling that God has always already been around us, loving us from the beginning, loving us as we were made, loving us through our mistakes, loving us as we made our way through crooked paths, hoping and placing our hopes in things we should not have been hoping for. It's in those moments of mystery that we suddenly realized that just as much as we have been searching for God, even more, in fact, God has been searching for us.

Earlier this week, I was on the phone with a friend of mine who just lost his father. And he was with his mother in Florida trying to settle the estate. And he's a Bible reader, a serious Bible reader. And so he asked me, what are you reading these days? And I was reading something from the Book of Job, from Job 38. And so he said, can you share it with my mother and I? And so he put the phone on speakerphone, and I said hello to them.

And I said, I'm thinking through one line from the Book of Job. It's chapter 38:7. And it's at this moment that Job has given up arguing with God about the suffering in the world and the suffering that he has experienced. It's a moment where Job is receiving the answer that he has wanted from God, from the beginning as to why the suffering has come.

And God answers Job out of a whirlwind. God says to Job, did you know this universe on the foundations that it was laid, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? In other words, Job does not know the mystery of God's knowledge, the mystery of why things happen in this world the way that they do. But in addition to that, this line says that there is joy in God that Job has not yet experienced. The joy that was at the beginning of creation when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings and angels shouted for joy.

And so I told my friend that the thing that I was going through in my mind was the fact that the joy of God is infinite. The joy of God is greater than we can ask or imagine. The joy of God is something that will overflow and that we will see only in glimpses in this world. But when we do catch a glimpse of what joy truly is like, it will be as if joy is everywhere.

Thomas Merton, the monk and contemplative famous for his spiritual writings, spoke about a moment in which he experienced joy in 1958 in Louisville. He wrote the following:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers... this sense of liberation, it was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

But joy is also a mystery as well as a source of longing. The third thing I want you to see about joy today is that the relationship of joy establishes a kind of justice and that justice is not meted out in terms of giving to everyone a kind of a response to the things that they bring into a relationship. It's not based in retribution, but the joy of justice is based in restoration. Because when we find out that we are so connected to someone else, we suddenly realize that we cannot simply be an ally to someone when they're in danger, but we have to bind ourselves to them. We have to see our destinies as entwined. We have to see that their well-being is tied to our well-being.

We have to see that connection as powerful and as real as the connection we have to our own bodies. We have to reach out to someone and lift them up when they need to be lifted up. We have to be willing and able to forgive those who hurt us. We have to be willing and able to plead their cause. In all these ways, joy is a kind of justice because running through all those things is the deep connection that we have to one another, that relationship we have to one another in Christ, that relationship, we have to one another in God. And that relationship is founded in the joy that is God, that is as real as the love of God.

The art I have before you today is perhaps a good example of the joy of justice. In 2002, I was at a conference and I got to meet some people from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And one of them invited me to take a group of students and come and visit and have a moment where I can see exactly what happened in South Africa.

And during that visit, someone gave me a beautiful gift of this incredible stone carving, which is done by the Shona people of Zimbabwe, but now is being done by others in Sub-Saharan Africa. And this Shona sculpture is a kind of way of communicating about the interconnection we have to one another, and it's become known through people like Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela, although this is a term that is as old as the continent itself. It's known as ubuntu, which can mean humanity. And it's from the Nguni languages. But it's often translated that I am because we are, or somehow a person is a person through other persons, a deep relationality exists, in other words, between us.

And that relationality between us is deeper than any kind of individuality that we have because we have been created to move into the Christian meter. We have been created for love with God. We are created and founded in the love of God, which is why when we read in the collect that we have been placed on the foundation of God's loving kindness, that we have been given a kind of promise and a kind of fulfillment that finds its path to us through joy. And it also finds its way to us through justice.

And so you and I have been called to see justice as a kind of interconnection that we have with one another. And this is why true justice seeks reconciliation and restoration. True justice seeks kind of a remuneration that brings the two parties back together.

After I received this wonderful gift of the ubuntu statue, the Shona carving in soapstone, I went to a market in Cape Town known as the Greenmarket, and it's this incredible huge market. And when I had received the statue from the people who gave it to me, I thought I'd been given something like a family heirloom and I was so honored. And I went into the Greenmarket and I discovered that these statues are everywhere. There's just thousands of them.

And even though it wasn't rare, even though it wasn't expensive, that didn't change the fact that that statue became precious to me because it was a witness to me that joy is not a scarce commodity. Joy is abundant. It's around us. It's drawing us to each other through the love of God. Joy helps us to make our way in the midst of opposition, in the midst of challenge, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of uncertainty, in the midst of fear, in the midst of foreboding, in the midst of all the things that would lead us from the love of God.

And this is why we have the promise today in the gospels that every one of our hairs are counted and that those who find their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Where in those last words from today's gospel, we

are being invited into a relationship where we lose ourselves to find ourselves in relationship with God. We are invited to enter more fully into the joy God has given us in Christ, the joy that you and I can experience together, the joy that holds us together when we are challenged, the joy that will sustain us as we make our way.

So as you make your way today, and as you make your way this week, listen for the longings of joy that will pop up around you. Look and enter into the mystery of God's incredible mysterious joy that surprises us with its fullness, and work to find a way to be more just in small things, and even in large things.

Amen.