

## Joy or Happiness

Text: Philippians 4:4-7

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 14, 2021*

I think one of the great misunderstandings of Christian faith is the belief that Christians are supposed to be happy all the time. I had a friend who was secretary of a church in Atlanta. With one son serving a life sentence in prison, another son having a psychotic break, and a husband in the hospital, she was, understandably, depressed. But she never told a soul in her church and expended all of her energy putting on this cheery front at work because she thought that to reveal her depression would be a bad witness for her faith. Christians aren't supposed to be depressed, she believed. They're supposed to be happy.

That is not Scripture. The Bible doesn't say, in the words of that annoying song a number of years back, "Don't worry, be happy." The Bible says, "Don't worry, rejoice." And there is a world of difference between the two. For Bible Word Nerds fans, just as we have two different words in English--happiness and joy, so the Greek also has two different words. The Greek word for happiness is *makarios* and it refers to the freedom of the rich from normal cares and worries. It's the word used to describe a person who has received some form of good fortune—money, health, children, a promotion—that sort of thing. And that's what our English word happiness is about. If I'm happy, it's because things are going well for me—my outward situation is good. There are no crises; I'm healthy; there's money in the checking account; nobody is out to get me; my job is going well, and so on.

When those things start to change, however, I don't remain happy. When I got divorced and suddenly had no home, no money, and watched the man I loved move in with someone else—I was not happy. And anybody who came along and told me that as a Christian I should have been happy would have gotten a lovingly-delivered kick in the teeth. Jesus got so angry that he went on a rampage through the temple. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus and over the city of Jerusalem. Jesus sweat drops of blood in the Garden. And, apart from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, of the seven recorded sayings of Jesus from the Cross, not one of them was "Hey, isn't life good! Why the long face, Mom? Cheer up!"

We do not have a direct command to always be happy. Neither do we have an example of an always-happy Jesus. What we do have is the promise of joy. The word in Greek is *chairō*, described by the ancient Greeks as the "culmination of being" and the "good mood of the soul." *Chairō* is something that's found only in and through God and it increases in our lives in proportion with both virtue and wisdom. Despite coming second on Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit, biblical joy isn't a beginner's virtue; it comes as the culmination. Its opposite isn't sadness, but fear.

Happiness is the great feeling that we get when everything is going smoothly. Joy is what God gives us in the midst of trouble when we put that trouble in God's hands. Both happiness and joy have no fear. Happiness has no fear because nothing bad is on the horizon, and everything appears to be on course. Happiness is fragile in that regard, as those who believe their happy situation can't turn on a dime, haven't lived long enough. As evidence, may I present this past year. Happiness is so fragile that fear can beat it down without even getting out of bed. I'm all for people being happy—I happen to prefer it to misery myself—but it's not something that can be permanently protected and it's not something that can protect us when the fullness of life's experiences comes calling.

Joy, on the other hand, is not fragile. It goes beyond even being resilient. It's what Christian Lebanese author Nassim Nicholas Taleb would call anti-fragile. Joy doesn't just stay intact when life's storms hit; it actually strengthens and grows as it senses a larger opportunity for a greater good. Happiness has no fear because our emotion in the moment has clouded our vision. Joy has no fear because it has its anchor in love, which in the battle with fear has already proven to be the stronger force. Those with joy have become willing to trust God

that their suffering—while not *planned* by God—can nonetheless be transformed and *used* by God to serve a greater purpose—a purpose that they have come to want more than anything else.

Another way we might describe the difference between the two is that we have happiness **BECAUSE** of our situation, we have joy **IN SPITE OF** our situation. With happiness, fear and destruction might be just around the corner. With joy, the very things that others fear have become, in God's hands, a means of spiritual growth and even salvation. In the face of joy, fear loses its power. It's what the Cross is all about. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Those words from 1 Corinthians 15:55 are a quote from the prophet Hosea, and Paul uses them as a taunt at fear's defeat.

That's why the passage from Philippians we read earlier, commanding us to rejoice, is immediately followed by the command not to be anxious about anything. Joy is not about getting rid of suffering, but of getting rid of the **FEAR** of that suffering. Easier said than done, I know. But recognize that Paul also knows how hard it is. He is not writing from a happy position. Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison—his last earthly home. Soon he will quite literally lose his head. And things are not going to be getting any better for the church in Philippi either. The atrocious persecutions of Christians under the reign of the Roman emperor, Nero, are about to begin. Christians torn apart by wild animals in the arena. Christians covered in tar and set ablaze to light the emperor's garden. There is about to be a time of great grief and loss and pain and torture. Paul is not telling them to be happy. This is not Pollyanna talking. Paul is telling them to rejoice.

Paul is telling them not to fear—not because it's going to be an easy road. Not because God is going to miraculously intervene and save them all from hardship. In Philippi, Christians with strong faith are going to be put to death. But Paul tells them not to be anxious...why? Because God is at work for the salvation of the world. God can use their pain, even their death, to save others. Their eternal spirit cannot be harmed, and God will fill their suffering with meaning and purpose.

Many people believe that if your faith is strong enough, bad stuff won't happen to you. Worse, confused but well-meaning Christians frequently go to those who are suffering and add to their misery by telling them if they had more faith things would have worked out. I spoke to a woman once whose baby had died from a heart problem. Waving a Bible, a Christian friend actually told her that she had killed her baby, because if she had prayed with more faith, her baby would have been healed. "Matthew 21:22" she quoted, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive." That is biblical malpractice and spiritual abuse, and it did lasting damage to that bereaved mother. If you find yourself tempted to try to help someone who is suffering with literal Bible quotes, exercise that self-control of the tongue we talked about a few weeks ago and stay silent. Sit and weep with them and then go home and read the book of Job.

For Paul to say "rejoice" instead of "be happy" is to acknowledge that Christians will have problems—bad problems, tragic events. No matter how much faith they've got. It's implied in the very word "rejoice." Some people will get diseases and die no matter how many prayers are said for healing. Promising young Christians will be gunned down by random violence, no matter how pure their lives have been. And in the midst of it all, we are told—not to be happy, but to rejoice. We are happy **BECAUSE OF**, we are joyful **IN SPITE OF**. Well, fine, but how do we get there?

Paul calls joy one of the fruits of the Spirit because we can't have joy until we have begun to develop a spiritual life. We can have happiness without spiritual development...as long as the conditions in our lives are favorable. But we can't have joy. Joy comes as a result of a complete trust in the love of God and a deep desire for the will of God to be done in the world, no matter what the cost might be to ourselves.

To find joy in the midst of our own pain, we have to stop caring only about ourselves and to find our own purpose in the context of the larger world. Joy comes from caring less and less about our specific situation and more and more about the larger communities of which we're a part. The first spark of joy is born as soon

as we realize that the truth of Jesus saying, "Whatever you have done to the least of these you have done it to me" also means that whatever we do to others we are doing to ourselves—because there **are no "others."** The good of someone else is our own good; the harm of someone else is our own harm. We are connected; we are one.

When our spirits are hidden with God, even our death cannot defeat us and every minute of our suffering can be used for God's good, which is the only thing that is truly good for us in the long run, because it's good for everyone. It is what Obi Wan Kenobi knew when he allowed Darth Vader to strike him down saying, "You can't win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." It's what Paul meant when he said, "To live is Christ, to die is gain." It's what Job meant when he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." It's what a friend's sister meant when she got a diagnosis of breast cancer and said, "It's a win-win situation. If I live...I get to keep on living. And if I die, I get to be with God."

This is what joy is about. Don't worry--not because God won't let the bad guy hurt you if you ask in faith. Don't worry because that bad guy will be made to serve the purposes of God if you will give the situation into God's hands. It comes from ultimate trust that God is good and loving and in the process of bringing peace on earth, goodwill to all. And it comes from wanting to be a part of that more than anything else in the world.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't fight disease and pray for healing and call on God for help in times of trouble. God encourages us to do just that and to do all we can both for ourselves and for others. But when the answer comes back "no," as it has for me countless times and as it did even to Jesus in the Garden; when there is nothing more to be done either in heaven or on earth than face the coming trouble, the goal of faith is to give it over to God in trust that what seems like the end of all things is merely a somber prelude to a glorious Easter morning. Such trust is rewarded with the joy of God that no person and no circumstance can ever take away.

With every step closer to that sort of faith, we see more of our fears dissolve. When we truly don't care whether we live or die as long as God's love is proclaimed and extended to all living, there is nothing left to fear. Joy enters our souls, just as it entered Bethlehem during Roman oppression and had to make due with a feeding trough for a bed. And that joy, once it enters, cannot be taken away, even by a cross. It's a gift more precious than any gold, frankincense or myrrh; and we must travel the distance of faith to receive it.

Moments of happiness have been hard to come by in the past year. Happiness comes and goes in the twinkling of an eye. But the joy of God can become our strength at all times and in all places and circumstances. Work for it. We have to grow all the other fruit of the Spirit to attain its full measure; but once it starts to grow within us, it will protect us from the fears that prevent us from working on all the rest of it. Like trees planted by streams of water, we shall not be moved. Fear has already been defeated. That is the Gospel, the good news. Joy springs from that knowledge and, once you have claimed it, God's full power can be channeled through you to the world. Amen.