***FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: JOY***

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Texts: Galatians 5:22-23 and John 15:1-11

What brings you joy? It is a question I occasionally ask folks in the course of pastoral care. What brings you joy? It often seems to catch folks off guard, as if it is a question they have not considered for a long time. Perhaps that should not be surprising, given how caught up we are in the challenges of day-to-day living; some of us rarely take time to consider the joys of our lives or to make space for them as intentionally as we do for other more necessary pursuits. Or we delude ourselves into thinking that some things – and they are often things – that make us fleetingly happy can bring us real joy. Or perhaps our reluctance to embrace joy is an offshoot of our Puritan roots. In his epic novel, *Hawaii*, James Michener has the Puritan missionary trying to convince native Hawaiians to put on clothes, preferably something in black wool, to reflect their pious Christian faith. It is the same stodgy tradition that suggests, “if it feels good, it must be wrong.” It is that dour perspective on faith that has turned off so many people over the years, people who are desperately seeking some good news to embrace, some hope to hold onto, some joy to fill their lives. We claim to believe and share good news. How can it truly be good news if that news is not overflowing with joy!

Years ago, we were singing *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee* in my dad’s church in Slippery Rock, PA when Chet O’Bannon who was the choir director shouted out, “*Stop! Stop! I can’t take it anymore*!” The organist stopped playing and a wide-eyed congregation wondered what disaster had befallen him. In the sudden silence Chet said to us all: “This is what I am seeing. “*Joyful, joyful, we adore thee*” (with sullen faces); you look like you are on the way to the dentist. This is a hymn about joy that is supposed to be sung with joy. So, I will give you another chance – from the beginning, but no more sour faces!” So we sang it again, this time with smiles all around, because no one wanted to be the one who didn’t get the message! I daresay that the singing of that same hymn today did not fare much better here than did the congregation in Slippery Rock those long years ago.

We bear good news, joyful news, for the world. How then can our lives and life together not reflect that joy? That is not to say that we will always be happy, but it is to say that joy is at the heart of the gospel and thus should be evident in our lives and life together. In his farewell address shortly before his arrest, Jesus speaks of himself as the vine with the disciples as the branches. It is from the vine that the branches get their sustenance and strength. Apart from the vine, they cannot survive and thrive and bear fruit. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,” he tells them. “Abide in my love.” Abiding in his love is living in his love, embracing his love, and reflecting his love to the world by loving one another as he showed us. He tells the disciples this, not as a strategy for promoting his movement, but as a faithful response to the love God has shown in his coming among us and the love that will be poured out for them on the cross just days later. “*Abide in me. Abide in my love*,” he says – to them, to us. For in that abiding, that living, we bear good fruit – and among the fruits we bear is joy!

“*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*,” he says. Do you hear that? The Great Commandment to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves is not a burden to bear but a way to find joy more fully. Living as he showed us and as he calls us to live should be a joyful experience. That is not to say there will not be hardships. Jesus tells them this knowing that the hard road to the cross lies ahead. But he wants them to abide in his love, in that way of living he has shown them even after he has gone with the assurance that joy is not only possible but essential in following him. The psalmist says, “*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!*” Jesus is preparing them for the weeping that is to come and the joy that will yet arrive with Easter’s dawn.

In his book, *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Martin Thielen tells of a little boy who ran into his house one afternoon in near hysteria. Through a cascade of tears, he announced to his mom that his pet turtle had rolled over and died. He was inconsolable. When his father came home, he gathered up the tearful boy in his arms, and as they sat in front of the dead turtle, the father suggested they have a funeral for the turtle. Everyone could wear black, there would be a processional, they could read from the Bible, just like a real funeral, and then they could bury the turtle in a little tin box. At this point the boy stopped crying and listened intently. “Then,” chimed in his mother, “we can have a party afterwards.” The boy smiled. The father went on, “Yes, and we’ll have your friends over for the funeral, and we can even have ice cream at the party.” By now the boy was grinning from ear to ear. But then, to the surprise of everyone, the turtle suddenly rolled back on his legs and began to crawl away. The boy looked startled and then exclaimed, “Oh, Daddy, quick. Let’s kill it.*”*[[1]](#endnote-1)

“*You have turned my mourning into dancing*,” says the psalmist. “*You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy*.” That is what those parents did for their son – though maybe not for the turtle. Inconsolable with grief in one moment, they painted such a rosy picture of the funeral celebration that the revival of the turtle became a disappointment to him. O that it were always so easy to turn our mourning into dancing and our sorrow into joy! But as we know all too well, it is rarely such a rapid turnaround. Sorrow does not so easily give up its grip on us. Joy is not always so easily embraced. Yet God’s continuing promise is that joy will be there to be embraced – even if we may not see it right away; even if we have to wait through the dark night for the morning, joy will be there. For every Good Friday there is Easter’s dawn, for every death the promise of life. That is God’s promise; it is a promise to be believed, a promise to trust, a promise to be embraced with hope and joy.

Gregory Jones shares the story of a child named John Todd who was born around 1800 in Vermont. When he was six years old, both of John’s parents died and all the children had to be divided up among various relatives. Little John was sent to live with an aunt whom he had never seen. She took exceptional care of him, seeing him through college and on to a successful career. Years later, John received word that his aunt was seriously ill and on the verge of death. She was terrified. Since he could not go to her bedside personally, he wrote these words to her in a letter:

*It is now 35 years since I, a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. I have never forgotten that day when I made the long journey to your house in North Killingsworth. I still recall how you sent your hired man, Caesar, to fetch me. And I can still remember my tears and anxiety, as perched on your horse and clinging tightly to Caesar’s back, I started out for my new home. As we rode along, I became more and more afraid, and finally said to Caesar, “Do you think she will go to bed before we get there?” “Oh, no,” he said reassuringly. “When we get out of these here woods, you will see her candle shining in the window.” In a short time, we did ride out into a clearing, and there, sure enough was your candle. I still remember the sight of you waiting at the door, how you put out your arms to me and lifted me down from the horse. I remember there was a fire on your hearth, a warm supper on your stove, and after supper, you took me up to bed, heard my prayers, and then sat beside me until I dropped off to sleep…Some day, soon, God may send for you to take you to a new home. Do not fear that summons, and do not fear the strange journey or the messenger of death. At the end of that road you will find love and welcome. You will be safe in God’s love and care. Surely God can be trusted to be as kind to you there as you were to me years ago.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning – joy comes with a light in the window, with a warm embrace, with a sense of being welcomed home with open arms! Joy comes with the promise of resurrection – a home with God long after we have left our earthly homes.

On several occasions I have had folks come to me after a funeral and say, “This is going to sound strange, but I really enjoyed the service today, or rather, I felt uplifted by it.” That is what our celebration of the resurrection and God’s promises for us in death should be – a hopeful, joyful celebration of God’s love for us and those we love, and not even death can break that promise, not even death can extinguish that joy. Weeping may linger in our mourning, but the dawn will surely come – and with the dawn is joy. Glorious joy! That is the good news of the gospel! That is the good news we bear to the world! That is the good news in which we love. That is the fruit of the Spirit that is joy! Amen

1. Martin Thielen, *The Answer To Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2014, p.15 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gregory K. Jones, *Play the Ball Where the Mokey Drops It*, HarperSanFrancisco:2001, pp.126-128 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)