

Sermon: Sudden, Unexpected Joy

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Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; Luke 24:44-53

Introduction to theme:

Our current sermon series, which runs through June 11, discusses the nine qualities on St. Paul's illustrious list that characterizes this thing he has dubbed the "Fruit of the Spirit." The Fruit (singular) of the Spirit is that which is made manifest through the works and visibility of faithfulness, goodness, self-control, patience, gentleness, joy, peace, kindness, and love. The first week, we talked about faithfulness, pointing out how God's steadfast example of faithfulness informs our own approach to the same. Then, we moved on goodness and the notion that we are already imbued with goodness, we just need a bit of help getting it out. Next, we shifted our focus to self-control as were reminded to keep our heads when everything around us is chaotic. We're called to act with appropriate restraint—not from a place of anger, but with a heart for what is good. Last week, we covered two virtues simultaneously: patience and gentleness. We looked turned our eyes toward the rainforest and the sloths of God's creation to see how being still helps shape a life characterized by patience and gentleness. Acceptance of our lack of control and a calm approach to life are part of how we show the Spirit of the living God is within and among us.

This week, we pass the halfway point as we move on to the most exuberant of qualities: Joy! Before we dive into what joy means for us as people of faith, we're going to listen to some scripture. First, we'll go to St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, the oldest words recorded in the New Testament, which expound on what it looks like to embody a good life well-lived. Then, appropriately for Ascension Sunday, we'll hear Jesus's final words to the disciples before he rises into the clouds and his physical presence at last leaves them. Let those with open hearts to hear listen.

Sermon:

Prolific American poet, the beloved Mary Oliver, took an approach to writing and to life that many a writer has sought to emulate. She viewed life at once from the sidelines and on the field of play itself. She observed, immersed herself in, but did not interfere with

the beauty and grace of God's created order. She knew the Divine as she knew herself, but did not let herself get caught up on religious doctrine or trip over prescribed liturgical worship. Oliver found God in nature—in the wild geese, the trees, the grasses—and in the love between individuals.

I've been a student of her work for more than a decade and have found her writing contains multitudes. One of the greatest gifts of reading Mary Oliver's work is the way in which her joy overflows unexpectedly, in surprising ways even when doesn't seem to be reflecting explicitly on joy at all. And then, there are the overt mentions, as in the poem "Don't Hesitate," in which she exhorts her readers to give into the plenty of joy, to seek it out amidst all the troubling moments of life. "Joy," she famously wrote, "was not made to be a crumb."

It is this surprising, plentiful nature of joy which I wish to speak to you about today. Joy is not a word we commonly use to describe much in our world as adults, is it? We're hesitant, as Oliver's poem suggests, to give into it. I have noticed it is used unreservedly, however, when we admire the beaming smiles on the faces of our children as they discover the world and finally begin to understand their place in it. I know just this week, my kids each experienced moments of joy that bear the markers of intense expression rarely felt in the world of us boring, old grown-ups.

As adults, it can be difficult to access joy, can't it? Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Now, think about the last time you experienced (or allowed yourself to experience) plentiful, exuberant, overflowing joy. Think about how many times in the past year you can honestly say you realized in the moment that you were genuinely joyful?

Now, think about your children or grandchildren and how often you've seen them experience joy even in a single day. Is there a stark difference there? Was it easier to remember the last time you witnessed a child's joy compared to your own? My guess is that yes, if it were a bar graph, the bar would be far higher for the little ones than it would be for any of us.

Children are primed to feel joy. They are built to experience it in the smallest of moments, the most insignificant of things. They do not have the jaded overwhelm we find throughout the world of hustling, bustling grown-ups. Mary Oliver found ways to hold onto that child-like feeling of joy, but did not take lightly the ways in which “adulting” seriously diminishes that spirit of joy.

In “Don’t Hesitate” she wrote, “We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.”

Sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It’s the little things, right? So cliché to say that, isn’t it? It’s the little things. Now, my wife won’t want me to bring this up, but once upon a time, I met Karl Rove. Shocked are you? So was she! He was doing a book tour and I was more of a political junkie than I am now, so I went to meet him. I was pregnant with my Weston at the time, and Rove told me then something I have never forgotten: “All the cliches are true.” And, he was right. They were about pregnancy and they generally are about life. It is the little things that often bring the most joy—but as we age and life becomes more complicated, so does our search for joy. It becomes impossible to find it because our perspective broadens, our world gets bigger, and we forget to “stop and smell the roses,” so-to-speak.

As I prepared this sermon, I tried to imagine what a life without joy might look like. I’d wager that kind of life is a life without much goodness or delight. It’s a life that lacks the stuff that makes life worth living. But what *is* joy really? Joy is not simple happiness. It is not mere contentment. Those are but shadows of true, unbridled joy. Joy cannot be contained. It fills to the brim and overflows. Joy is characterized by its intensity. It turns the volume up on happiness, offering a degree of it in its purest, most exuberant expression.

I think that as adults we struggle with joy because we like to keep ourselves all buttoned up. Our lives have become weighed down by the serious stuff of life. We’re too serious about too many things. We don’t feel joy and we rarely even use the word because the

very idea is obnoxious, it feels gratuitous; it is for children, not for us. It's like those Trix cereal commercials, "Silly pastor, joy is for kids!"

But if joy were only meant to be felt regularly by children, why is scripture nearly bursting with mentions of it? The words joy, rejoice, or joyful appear more than 400 times in scripture. 400 times! That's not a small number. Many of those mentions are part of instructions to God's people to let themselves *experience* joy. Feel it. Scripture commands it. It tells us that joy is integral to our life with God.

St. Paul, in his letter to the church at Thessalonica, had something to say about our life with God. I mentioned earlier that 1 Thessalonians is, indeed, the oldest of all the books of the New Testament and would, therefore, be among Paul's first letters. You'll notice I used the words among, and I say that simply because it's terribly unlikely that Paul only wrote the 7-14 (depending on which scholar you're speaking to) letters which are attributed to him. The selection of 1 Thessalonians we heard today is among the most often quoted of all his words. It is the last he offers in the body of this letter and contains some of the most affirming, positive, hope-filled words Paul is ever purported to have written.

I don't know about you, but these kinds of words are exactly why, though I disagree with Paul on many, many things, I still enjoy reading his work... most of the time. The man has hope! That hopefulness is a necessity in our faith and something we must hold onto in a world as troubling and broken as ours is. 1 Thessalonians is probably the most positive of all Paul's letters, perhaps because its written so early in his ministry and before churches had let personalities supersede purpose. We should never let personalities rule over purpose, but it happens all the time in the church and outside of it.

In the lectionary calendar, this passage is read only once every three years. On Gaudete Sunday, when we light the pink candle of joy, and only in year B (so we will read it again later this year). On that Sunday, we light a pink candle instead of the usual purple because it is on that day that we are reminded of our call to rejoice even in a somber, penitential season like Advent. We are shaken from our usual seriousness to experience JOY!

You may recall my saying that, Sundays *in* Lent are not Sundays *of* Lent. They are not included in the 40-day Lenten season. If you give something up for Lent, on Sundays, you can have a little bit of that. The reason is because Sundays are always a “little Easter,” they are always days of in which we REJOICE in the knowledge of our risen savior *even though* we may walk through challenging, somber, and penitential times. We are called to JOY. We’re commanded to rejoice amidst good times, challenging times, celebratory times, and painful times. We are called to be joyful in *all* circumstances.

In this letter, Paul wrote, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Rejoice always. This is a call to wholeness, it is a command to what William Brosend called, “exuberance of expression,” which will lead us into “exuberant life!”

Rejoice always. Paul isn’t being hyperbolic here. He is not asking for something that cannot be accomplished. It is not some future goal only to be accomplished in God’s kingdom or the life to come. Paul is telling us that God’s will is for us to “Rejoice always” now. “Pray without ceasing” now. “Give thanks in all circumstances” now. This is a call to unreserved action. Wild, free, unrestrained joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. Paul is saying this is not just possible, but it is part of our call to live lives characterized by joy, prayer, and gratitude. This isn’t Paul inflating his text with overblown pronouncements. Paul is being precise here. Rejoice, pray, show gratitude. Always. That’s not exaggeration. It’s not hope. It is expectation.

Now I know what you may be thinking: Pastor Jessica, how can I find joy with x, y, and z happening in my life? Where is the rejoicing when people are suffering amidst war and atrocities all over the world? How can I find unrestrained, wild happiness and give thanks when my loved one is so sick or heading in for surgery this week? My life is a shambles, pastor, how dare you ask me to rejoice and be grateful!

And I hear you. It’s hard. If it were easy, I suppose Paul wouldn’t have had to spell it out here and it wouldn’t need to be mentioned over 400 times in scripture. Finding joy and being grateful is HARD. STUFF. It’s hard. Do it anyway.

After he gives these orders, Paul reminded us to hold fast to what is good. He wrote, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets.” This thing I ask of you is no less than what is possible with the power of the Spirit of the living God following in the path of the prophets who came before you. He’s letting them know that this is hard, but they do not go it alone. God is with them. Joy is always possible because God is always with you.

At the end of this section of scripture, Paul offers this blessing, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then he closes with what William Brodson translates the this way, “Faithful is the one calling you, who will do even this.” Faithful is the one calling you. This kind of spirit-filled, joyful, prophetic, prayerful, eucharistic life *is* possible with God because God is faithful. God is faithful.

It's not asking too much to be joyful at all times because nothing is too much with God. Before he was born, the angels told a very pregnant Mary (and by extension us) that she could carry God incarnate in the body of a little babe because nothing is impossible with God.

After Jesus ascended into the clouds to be united with the Father and Spirit, St. Luke told us, “They worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy...” (24:52). Though he had left them in body, their eyes had been opened by the power of God’s Spirit and they were able to go about the work of spreading the good news throughout the world. They realized in that moment what they could not see when they were blinded by grief at the loss of their teacher after the crucifixion and what they couldn’t yet see on the road to Emmaus: Nothing is too much or impossible with the Still-speaking God who is faithful.

In her poem, Mary Oliver takes a page from St. Paul in saying that yes, even as adults, when sudden, unexpected joy comes upon us, we must give into it. All the challenges in life are not a reason to let our joy dissipate or disappear; they are a reason for us to let it come roaring back. When something happens that brings you joy, we must affirm the knowledge that something *can* be “better than all the riches or power in the world.”

We sometimes worry our joy is too much for the moment we are in. There's too much pain. There's too much suffering. And we're not wrong, there is too much of all those things. But, as Paul and Mary remind us, we weren't made only for pain and suffering. We weren't made merely to survive. Christ's resurrection is an ever-present reminder that we weren't made for death; we were made for exuberant life! We were made for joy. Oliver finishes her poem with this line, "Joy is not made to be a crumb." Joy is not made to be a crumb.

So hear me now, my friends: Grab a whole slice of joy, my friends, relish its plenty! This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Amen.