

“Seeking joy”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I recently came across an article with the headline, “Neuroscience Says Doing This One Thing Makes You Just as Happy as Eating 2,000 Chocolate Bars. Doing it also gives you the same neurological boost as receiving \$25,000.” Well, no surprise, I clicked on the article. (Wouldn’t you be really angry if I hadn’t, and I was just like, “I don’t know what it said. I was just telling you.”) Granted, I wasn’t sure who in the world ever ate 2,000 chocolate bars. But I opened the article and read its research: a number of scholarly studies examining brain waves and heart rates, all pointing to one inexorable conclusion. A secret to happiness. What was it? A smile. A range of fMRI studies revealed that simply by smiling, even when we don’t feel like it, we can boost our mood tremendously, even extend our life expectancy. A smile, it turns out, is like an injection of happiness.

My sermon today, “Seeking joy,” isn’t quite so provocatively titled. But we’re asking the same question: How do we find joy? We talked about joy, in a sermon, a couple months ago. Several of you wrote me later, asking, “But what if I don’t feel joy?” You spoke of times when you’ve been grieving, stressed, anxious, or just up to your neck in work or life stuff. There’s no question that a lot of us have been feeling pretty distant from joy this year.

I admit that I felt reluctant to write this sermon. I wasn’t feeling particularly joyful myself. I experienced my first birthday without my Mom. I woke that day feeling quite depressed. Learning that my identity had been stolen and was being used to try to scam church members, didn’t exactly help my mood. More profoundly, I carried the grief of a third member of the Foresman family dying this year. I felt tired of death. Joy was the last thing I wanted to write about.

So it occurred to me to be honest. It’s OK sometimes not to feel joy. Sometimes life is hard, and we need to grieve. I am struck by the fact that even Jesus spoke these words: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Jesus didn’t feel joy when, as a child, he was forced to flee to Egypt as a refugee. He didn’t feel joy when he saw God’s people hurting each other or hurting God. He sure didn’t feel joy on the cross.

God does desire joy for us. John 15:11: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” But there are times, just as there were for Jesus, when other feelings are called for. And that’s OK.

The question then becomes: How do we bring joy alongside our stress and grief? We know that these feelings can co-exist. Parenthood, if nothing else, will teach you that. As a parent, I am more stressed, more exhausted, than I have ever been in my life. I am also more joyful than I have ever been in my life.

So, how do we seek joy?

Turns out it’s a pretty simple answer the Bible gives: help somebody. Want joy, Isaiah asks? Then, “bind up the brokenhearted.” Help somebody. Want joy, Paul asks? Then, “look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (1 Phil. 2:4). Help somebody. Want joy, Jesus asks? “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Help somebody.

It’s the story we are about to celebrate. God, in the heavens, heard God’s people cry. God could have remained in the safety of God’s perfection, but instead, to find joy, God came to us. God emptied God’s self, became one of us. That’s what Christmas is all about: God reaching out of the heavens to touch us, to run fingers along our scars, to love them and to heal them. God came, in the person of Jesus Christ, to help somebody.

You ever notice how, when you’re having a really bad day, and somebody comes to you asking for help, and you don’t feel like helping them (you’ve got problems of your own), but you help them anyway... you ever notice how you feel

better afterward, how you feel a little more clear-sighted, a little more purposeful, a little lighter, like you've been freed from some of your own problems? That's joy sneaking up on you, because you helped somebody.

And just so that we're clear, let me broaden that statement. I want to suggest that the path to joy is reaching out. Get outside yourself. Help somebody, forgive someone, go into nature, go to a museum, look at art, read a book. Do something that takes you out of yourself and reorients you to something bigger.

Much like the gospel, it is counter-intuitive. We think that the secret to a good life is to shield ourselves from pain. We build bigger and bigger houses, take more and more vacations, retreat into our technology, our television, our video games. We think that pain is out there, and if we could just build big enough walls, we'll be OK. Who in their right mind would think that reaching out into suffering, into prisons and homeless shelters and nursing homes, would bring joy? Who would think that sitting beside one who is dying would bring joy?

Who, but Jesus—who left the most secure place ever, heaven—to do just that. Joy is not in security, Jesus says. Joy is in connection. Why? Because joy isn't something we possess. Joy belongs to God, and to the interconnected fabric of existence. Joy is bigger than us. If we retreat inward, we secure only our despair, for we cut ourselves off from the source of joy. It's only when we reach out, that we connect with God and with God's joy.

The secret to joy—the secret to a good life—isn't a lack of suffering. It's not being rich, or beautiful, or famous, or having the perfect family, or the perfect life. The secret isn't to run away from the suffering of the world; ironically, unexpectedly, it's to run into it. With open arms. Not just suffering of course, but the full spectrum of human experience, of creation, of music, art, nature, touch, literature.

There's scientific evidence to back this up. In a *different* article, this one in *Time Magazine*, Jenny Santi reports on fMRI studies that show that, when we help others, we activate the same parts of the brain that are stimulated by food or intimacy. Moreover, when we reach out and make connections—with people, with creation—we experience parts of our brain typically dormant, unleashing an oceanic feeling akin only to God.

Santi also, however, makes an important caveat. She says that, of course, helping others doesn't always give joy. Sometimes, on the contrary, it depletes us. The key variable, she says, is whether we are able to connect our helping with our passion. This is where we need to distinguish between us reaching out and others reaching in. This isn't about answering every demand on your life. Joy will not be found by doing whatever anyone asks of you. You literally can't. People want more from you than you can give. Rather, joy will be found when you give from your truth, whatever that may be. Which means you have to know who you are in order to share yourself with others. This isn't so much selflessness as it is connecting the self to the other.

It's why, despite how I was feeling this week, of all my ministries, funerals and caring for the grieving are among my most joyful. They aren't pleasurable. But joy isn't principally about pleasure. They are joyful because, for once in our lives, we are stripped of all pretense; we stand naked before God and before each other, with our tears and our hopes. And in seeing one another as we really are, all the ugly and all the beautiful, we shoulder one another, and we feel, we know, God is there, intimately. It's in those moments that I feel my purpose reaching out to serve others.

That's joy. When we connect, we realize our fullness in God. We tap into a hidden power.

Many of us face real and immense challenges. The death of a loved one. Injustice. Betrayal. Violence. Aging. Poverty. These problems don't go away just because we make a connection. Rather, because of that connection, we no longer carry them alone. The problems don't shrink; we get bigger.

That's the gospel irony. Instinct tells us that when we're feeling down, that's time to focus on ourselves, hunker down. But the opposite is true. That's the time to stand up and reach out. That's how we find joy. **Amen.**