

“Cultivating Joy”

Introduction: A couple of weeks ago we began our summer “project” of looking at the fruit of the spirit, piece by piece. This fruit bowl of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control is given to us by Paul in Gal. 5:16-25, and is simply the most all-encompassing description of Christian character that we have. It’s a list that mirrors the character of Jesus who has called us to follow him, becoming more and more like him as we do so. The tricky part is that like any fruit, or vegetable, that we might plant, we cannot produce such character by sheer will-power; such character is only produced by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. At the same time, our role is not a passive one but one in which we participate in the process by cultivating the conditions of our heart, the soil in which the Spirit works.

As we think about joy this morning, I think the most helpful way to think about it is in contrast to happiness. Happiness, as it has been said, depends upon what happens to you. We become happy when circumstances land in our favor. But joy is a condition we can experience regardless of circumstance. Joy, as produced by the Holy Spirit, is a sense of contentment because we know our lives are secure in Christ. Joy is not the absence of trouble; it is the presence of Jesus.

I. Rivalry at the River

A. Let’s begin at the river where a bit of a rivalry was threatening to develop. John, recall from our advent texts, had been charged with preparing the people in and around Jerusalem for the coming of Jesus. Now, with the arrival of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry, the ministries of John and Jesus had begun to overlap. As John the gospel writer describes it for us, an argument over the meaning of baptism as it related to the long-standing practice of Jewish, ceremonial washing, spilled over into a bit of jealousy. Jesus, the followers of John noticed, was stealing sheep! “All that you did for this fellow Jesus,” they exclaimed, “and now here he is taking your parishioners away; everyone is going to him!” Jesus’ church, if we can put it that way, was growing faster than John’s, and they were not happy!

B. John’s response was incredibly gracious: “He must become greater; I must become less.” Why? Using the illustration of a bride and groom, John understood himself in the role of the best man. Among other responsibilities, the best man’s role in an ancient Judean wedding was to listen for the groom’s voice as he came in procession to the bride’s home to take her with him. His job was to make sure that people (the bride) got connected to Jesus (the groom). And that’s where we meet the notion of Joy. The hearing of the groom’s voice filled the best man with joy; connecting the bride with the groom made that joy complete. By John’s way of thinking, envy or jealousy or rivalry was silly because it was all about the groom. While John’s followers weren’t happy at their diminishing numbers, John was filled with joy because Jesus was present, and more and more people were turning to him.

II. The Fruitless Pursuit of Happiness

A. Let’s think about happiness for a moment. The US Declaration of Independence proclaims that we have the right to the “pursuit of happiness.” Have you ever wondered what would make you truly happy? How would you know if you found it? Most of us, I think, are inclined to say that we’d be happy “if only.” If only I had certain possessions; if only certain people were in (or not in!) my life; if only I had that job of my dreams...then I’d be truly happy. But this is what one author calls “manufactured

joy,” desires that are created by our culture that we’re led to believe we need if we want to be happy. If allowed to grow, such desires can choke out true joy for if and when we get that thing or circumstance we thought we wanted or needed, we find that it’s not all that satisfying, or that it’s fleeting.

Illustration: David Brooks, in his recent book, *The Second Mountain*, reflects on the insufficiency of the pursuit of happiness. The subtitle of his book, *The Quest for a Moral Life*, could just as easily have been *The Quest for Joy*. In his book, Brooks observes that our lives often have a two-mountain shape. We get out of school, begin a career, start a family, and seek to make our mark in the world. As we climb this first mountain, as Brooks names it, we spend a lot of time analyzing our progress, keeping score, and trying to determine if we’re achieving success, like being well thought of, having a nice home, a nice job, a nice family, nice vacations, nice food, nice friends, and so on.

But when we get to the top of that first mountain, and taste its success, we often find it unsatisfying. “Is that all there is?” we ask, and then we slowly begin to descend into a kind of valley. Others get knocked off that summit and into the valley by some kind of personal failure. Still others encounter some kind of tragedy or unexpected event that brings them down. Some people never make it out of the valley but for others, Brooks has found, it can be the making of them. They begin to elevate their desires and ascend a second mountain, one in which they start to pursue a deeper, more joy-filled life, goals that are greater than personal happiness, activities that move them from being self-centered to other-centered and from being a good consumer to one who is consumed by a good cause.

Brooks concludes: “If the first mountain is about building up the ego and defining the self, the second mountain is about shedding the ego and losing the self. If the first mountain is about acquisition, the second mountain is about contribution. If the first mountain is elitist—moving up—the second mountain is egalitarian—planting yourself amid those who need, and walking arm in arm with them” (p. xvi). Losing the self, contribution, walking arm in arm with those in need, this is all has to do with pursuing joy. So how do we get there? Especially if we find ourselves down in the valley, how do we cultivate the kind of contentment and joy that would begin to move us up that second mountain?

III. Cultivating Joy

A. Such joy is cultivated as we do what John did—he waited on and listened for the voice of Jesus. And then he undoubtedly did what we hear Jesus call us to do if we want to experience his joy—keeping his commands or putting what we hear into practice (3:29; 15:10-11). Don’t miss that this is how Jesus himself experienced joy, by keeping the Father’s commands and so remaining in his love. Jesus want us, as well, to experience such joy. It comes not when we live how we want to live, though that might seem to make us happy at the time. True joy arises when we live how God wants us to live. The weed of wanting to be our own authority, our own boss, needs to be identified and pulled wherever and whenever we see it.

B. Such joy is cultivated when we share Jesus with others. Again, going back to John the Baptist, although he was losing followers, he was growing in joy because he was introducing the life-changing love of Jesus to those who really needed it. John the gospel writer experienced the same thing as he writes in the opening of his first letter, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. . . We write this to make our joy complete” (1 Jn. 1:3-4). There is nothing more joy producing than sharing the good news and seeing someone’s life change as a result.

C. Such joy is cultivated when, in the midst of the trials of life, we embrace the security of our hope. Turn back with me to our call to worship, taken from Psalm 16. There we hear the psalmist recognizing all the various paths to happiness that are laid out for him but recognizing that the only one that leads to joy is the path the Lord sets before us. So, he sets out to fix his eyes on the Lord, trusting that with the Lord present to him, he will be able to stand firm, experiencing joy in the present and eternal pleasure in the future. With this psalm in the background, you might go to 1 Peter 1:3-9, to hear about how the new birth into a living hope that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus brings us into an inexpressible and glorious joy. Either passage is worth memorizing, planting it in the soil of your heart, and praying through it to allow the Spirit to work his joy deep down into you.

D. One who shares an experience of such joy is a woman named Rhoda, who lives in Malawi. Ruth Calver, who led our women's fall retreat a number of years ago, met Rhoda when traveling there with her husband Clive, who was then head of World Relief. Ruth encountered Rhoda while walking the dusty and dirty streets of the capital city, Lilongwe. Rhoda is blind and because her husband is unable to work due to a mental illness, and she has no training, Ruth was forced to beg daily in order to survive. She also cares for a small baby, her granddaughter, because her daughter had died from AIDS when the infant was only a few days old. When Ruth first met Rhoda, Rhoda had just discovered that her water jar had been stolen from her. It had been her only earthly possession!

When Ruth discovered that Rhoda was a Christian, she asked if Rhoda had a message for her brothers and sisters in the west. "Yes, I want you to tell them that Rhoda is doing well and that all is fine for me here. Please say to my brothers and sisters that I have everything I need, because I have Jesus."

Against Rhoda's experience, hear again Psalm 16:8: "I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken." With our lives secure in Christ, we can shed our ego and lose our self because our identity comes not from our performance or what we have but from God's love for us. We can move from acquisition to contribution because we trust God to meet our needs. We can walk arm in arm with those in need because we know God has his arm around, and is walking with, us. With our lives secure in Christ we can move from chasing after happiness to cultivating joy.