

September 23, 2018
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Transformed by Joy

Matthew 13:44

Galatians 5:22-26

The story of the Gospel begins and ends with joy.

When the angels appear in the night sky near Bethlehem to announce Jesus' birth, the angel says to the terrified shepherd, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Lk 2:10-11)

And at the very end of the story of the good news of great joy for all people, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb where Jesus' body had been put after his crucifixion and the Gospel of Matthew tells us that there was a great earthquake when an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled the stone away. Out of fear, the Roman guards at the tomb became like dead men. But the angel spoke to the women and told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that they were to go and tell the disciples this amazing great news. And Matthew remembers that the women "left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell [Jesus'] disciples." And while they were going Jesus met them and they "came and took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. [Matt 28:8-9]

If the story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – whom we claim as Lord and Savior – begins and ends with great joy, why are so many of his followers more marked by worry, fear, guilt, resentment and anger than we are marked by joy?

Something is wrong.

In his letter to the Church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul teaches us that the result of the Spirit of God -or the fruit of the Spirit – is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) And, if we are willing to look ourselves in the mirror and to evaluate the character of our lives, then we know something is wrong.

And I remember when I read and felt – deep in my own heart – the power of the prayer on the Psalmist in Psalm 51.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,*

*And do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
And sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Too often, we are tired, resentful, worried and angry. Too often do we need to pray to have the joy of salvation restored to us. And too often when we think of “joy” do we think of just about anything but the life of faith and the worship of God. Something is wrong.

How do we make it right?

How can we be transformed by Joy?

How can we again have a willing spirit?

How do we reclaim the “good news of great joy for all the people”?

When we held our Officers’ Retreat, Dan and I were charged to pick four Christian values that we felt – when they were lived out and embodied – would transform us more and more into those who look like Christ. Transforming head, heart and hands in the service of Jesus Christ. And we picked Joy.

We will spend a Sunday on each of the four values on which the Officers focused over the next four weeks. And today our challenge is how to reclaim Joy – specifically Christian Joy.

I don’t know about you, but my impression is that what many Christians call “salvation” doesn’t result in joy. Either salvation results in a sense of resigned duty – as in “we have to go to worship today” or in a self-satisfied assurance that gives us the sense of belonging to an exclusive club and causes us to believe mistakenly that we are in a position to judge whether or not others are also a member of the saved club. I want to define Christian Joy as something entirely different from that.

Christian Joy is not smug self-satisfaction

Christian Joy is not boring duty.

Christian Joy is not pretending to be happy when we are not, or pretending to be fine when we are not.

So, what is Christian Joy and how do we practice it? How can we be transformed by Joy?

I’m going to tell you what I think. And I’d invite you to think about this yourself and argue with me if you disagree. But in any case, this is your invitation to figure out how to claim the great joy that is promised to all people through Christ.

I think that Christian Joy is a deep, unshakable knowledge that I am known and loved by God in a way that is unshakable and that does not depend on my ability to be good enough or holy enough or pure enough to earn that overpowering love of the God who made me.

Christian joy is related to, but is different from happiness.

Christian joy is really unrelated to our current situation – which might be trouble free or might be chaotic and full of suffering. Christian Joy is related to the unchanging assurance of God's love and power and grace.

And I think that the thing that gets in the way of Christian Joy is that we either don't trust or don't value God's love and so end up spending our energy and time chasing after all sorts of things that we think will make us happy – and so we give away our Joy.

To know – deep in our hearts and minds – that God loves us, allows us to drop worry, self-protective defenses, ambition and our need to control. To know that God loves us is the only way we will ever be willing to put God and not our own ego in the center of our lives.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Joy comes from a single-minded pursuit of the God who made us, loves us, redeems us and will claim us – no matter what. Joy comes when we feel secure enough in God's love to let go everything else that we think makes us lovable and frees up that energy to love God and others and self – without pretense and without self-justification.

Joy is what rises up in us when and if we get to the place where the Apostle Paul was when he wrote the letter to the Philippian Church. Joy is not the absence of suffering or evil. Joy is knowing the God who is greater than any evil and who both knows our suffering and will use that suffering to change us into people who cling to God more than we cling to our own defenses, justifications, needs, or egos. IN that state we can say with conviction – with Paul – that all that we had are less than worthless compared to having Christ and belonging to Christ.

Paul doesn't write those words in Chapter 4 from an air-conditioned couch. Paul writes from prison. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:4-7)

If our approach to the world is not characterized – more often than not – by Joy, then we are not able to represent Christ to the world, nor can we call ourselves witnesses to the GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL. This doesn't mean that we are never sad or worried or angry. There is much genuine evil in the world and there is soul crushing suffering in which we may find ourselves. We do worry about our own lives and the lives of those we love. Joy is not a mask that we put on to pretend, and Joy is not ignoring the hurts and injustices in the world. But true Christian Joy is a way of living that remembers and lives out of the conviction that God's love and power and grace are stronger than any suffering, any evil, any hurt. True Christian Joy refuses to hold

onto hurts and resentments and anger more tightly than we hold to the love and grace and salvation that comes from God.

When joy escapes us, it is possible for us to ask ourselves – what is it that we are holding on to? Is it our own worry? Our own need to be in control? Our own hurts and bruised egos?

In order to be transformed by Joy – in order to have the joy of God’s salvation restored in us – we must claim and own God’s love for us with the urgency with which we would try to own a treasure that we found, hidden in a field. In order to be transformed by Joy we must let go of ALL else to be the owners of this great good news.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
And do not take your holy spirit from me.
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