

## **“THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: JOY”**

Isaiah 12:1-6; Hebrews 12:1-2

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What makes you happy? And what brings you joy? Are these the same question or is there a difference between happiness and joy? The handful of books I looked at claimed that there was and my intuition agrees with this claim, but the distinctions that they lay out seem like a caricature of happiness, making it sound almost sinful whereas joy can do no wrong.

Former executive presbyter of Lake Michigan, Steve Doughty, says this in his book: “We live in a culture that values happiness, often in its most exterior and fleeting forms, but knows little of joy” (p.94). Eugene Peterson adds some very colorful language to this assessment when he writes, “...the enormous entertainment industry in America is a sign of the depletion of joy in our culture. Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal” (p.96).

I don't think anyone would disagree that the search for happiness often results in a very disappointing and shallow form as happens anytime we try to replace God with something material or transitory. We've all heard sermons about how easy it is for things like money, power, prestige and pleasure can to become idols. Frankly, I'm a little bored with that message. I'm not so interested in talking about what happens at the extremes: the nominal Christians blind to their own loyalty to personal gain and the Christians who take faith so seriously that they're scarcely recognizable as human beings.

So I begin with the assumption that happiness is a good thing, and that God wants us to be happy. Incidentally, the authors I cited also believe this. They're simply taking a different path to explain the difference between happiness and joy. I'm interested in the subtle distinctions, what happens on the border between happiness and joy, in the place where both are still good.

So what makes you happy? I want you to turn your thoughts inward now and listen only with one ear as I offer some examples for myself. My Greek professor from seminary calls this the inductive method where you learn a subject by engaging it as you go. Things that make me happy: finishing a book, seeing a bird I haven't seen before, jigsaw puzzles, visits to art museums, noting the changes in seasons, the fall color, the winter snow, that fresh, new green of spring, and the warmth of the summer sun. These things delight me, but what makes you happy? I'm also glad when I receive a bonus, a Christmas present, or an all clear from the doctor. I'm happy listening to music, playing a game, or shopping online. But what makes you happy? I take pleasure in the candidates I voted for getting into office, in my teams doing well, and in making my point well. People make me happy: Janet and my daughters, friends and colleagues, authors I read, speakers I hear. A new idea makes me happy. What makes you happy?

Some of these things are fleeting, happiness in a moment that passes. Some of them circle around and are part of my experience regularly. And some of them seem deeper and more profound, bordering on joy. In fact many of them pass into moments of joy under certain circumstances. Listening to music makes me happy, but listening to my daughter sing, brings me joy. Being able to continue worship in the midst of this pandemic makes me happy, but seeing the faithfulness of our musicians and tech crew and knowing that you are out there in your homes connecting to worship. That brings me joy. Singing here makes me happy, but hearing you sing and clap brings me joy.

Winning a game makes me happy most of the time, but losing to someone I love or someone who has played the game well has brought me joy. Being in nature makes me happy. Seeing the creator in the beauty of the earth. That's joy. The bonus puts a smile on my face, but the affirmations that come from people saying that I've blessed them with my ministry... that's joy too. What brings you joy? I like art, but when I look at a painting and I know the artist and what went into the work, I often feel joy.

For me, pleasure becomes joy when the experience includes people. I am happy to know that there are people out there who are fighting to end racism; fighting by writing books and giving talks that make us more aware of the history, the politics, and the examples of racism that impact us today; but I rejoice in knowing that many of you share that dream to end its many incarnations.

Joy can happen when you're by yourself, but not when you're alone. Joy always includes the community. Do the experiment yourself. Think about the things that make you happy and the things that bring you joy. Experiences shared with others often transform happiness into joy.

Isaiah closes his oracle with "shout aloud and sing for joy...." Why? Because "great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel, ..." people of Zion! Here, where an individual gives thanks for God's mercy, it is placed into the context of the community of faith. And the joy is about a relationship with God. "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation," says the prophet. Joy is frequently linked with salvation throughout scripture. And salvation is always about restoring the community's relationship with God. It's about being together... with God at the center.

Hebrews 12 opens with the great cloud of witnesses, what we refer to in the Apostles' Creed as the communion of the saints. This community only exists because Jesus, "for the sake of the joy set before him" endured the cross. There's a lot to unpack in that phrase, but one thing it tells us is that joy can be so deep and profound that it can exist even in the midst of suffering. When happiness takes a turn toward sorrow, joy remains constant.

Think about the experience of grief when a companion of many years is near death after much suffering. Joy lingers just above the surface in the intimate presence, those special memories, and the hoped for release. Joy is so versatile. I knew a woman whose husband was abusive. She locked herself in the bathroom once when he became violent and the

only thing she could think to do, was to sing over and over again “Jesus loves me, this I know.” A frightening experience, but there was joy in that song that sustained her.

You know, there is so much joy in scripture. In Genesis 2, God breathes the breath of life into this human shaped dust and it becomes a “living being.” I hear joy in this sharing of the divine with the human. A little later God pulls out a rib and from it makes a woman. Adam looks at her and after having found no suitable companion, says, “This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Do you hear the joy in those words? When the Ark of the Covenant is being returned to Jerusalem after having been rescued from the Philistines, David casts aside his royal dignity and dances before it in the streets. Jacob finds the love of his life at a well. A woman of Samaria finds Jesus at a well and after talking with him finds her life transformed and she becomes the first evangelist to share the good news. The story of Ruth and Naomi, a story about love, but there must have been so much joy underneath that. The angels deliver good news of great joy to the shepherds when Jesus is born. The child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy when Mary visits her. There is joy in the resurrection. There is joy in the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles.

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy.... Peterson describes joy not as a requirement for being a Christian, but as a consequence of following Christ. It is certainly true that as we are faithful to Jesus’ leading we should anticipate the joy that is part of belonging to the community of faith, to the body of Christ. But there is a danger that we will become arrogant, boastful about how happy we are and... how impossible it is for nonbelievers to experience this kind of joy.

Some segments of the church have acknowledged that Jesus is not the only way to God. I think Jesus would want us to accept a common humanity, that some of the little ones that Jesus loves are not Christians. God’s breath lies within all people. All people are blessed with spirit and thus have the capacity to bear the fruit of the spirit.

We have a bond because we follow Jesus. Jesus gives shape to the community we form. Our joy takes place in the context of this community. Maybe it transforms and deepens happiness into joy for us. But the spirit is accessible to anyone. The spirit binds people together for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Christians are not the only ones able to form community, and frankly, sometimes we do it poorly. And we know when we’re not doing it well because we feel less love, less joy, less peace....

We were talking about contemporary prophets at Bible Study last week and someone mentioned that most of the people we named did not identify as Christians. The truth is, we need larger communities than just the church community to address the world’s problems. Racism impacts Christians, Muslims, Hindus and non-believers. Caring for the earth is going to take Jews, Buddhists, and atheists to be effective. We need to be engaged in these struggles but with less arrogance. We do not have to abandon Jesus to embrace another. The spirit pushes us to expand our circle. To do so is to deepen the possibility for joy, because joy deepens with connections.

So what makes you happy? There's nothing wrong with this question. God wants us to be happy. But we won't find salvation in the pursuit of happiness. The good news is that God's breath lies within all of us. We all have spirit, and the fruit of the spirit is joy. You're capable of joy. Your neighbors and friends are capable of joy. Your enemies are capable of joy. If you want to break down some of those walls that separate us one from another, ask yourself, "What brings me joy?" Somewhere in your answer to that question, you'll discover your community, the people who matter to you. Somewhere in that answer, maybe you'll see Jesus differently. Just maybe, somewhere in that answer you'll hear God's call. Be happy, but don't settle for just being happy. Listen to the spirit calling to you, "Rejoice!" Amen.

Resources:

Doughty, Steve. To Walk in Integrity: Spiritual Leadership in Time of Crisis. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 2004.

Peterson, Eugene H. A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL, 2000.