

Advent 2018 – Third Sunday – Joy

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Be joyful always.

There are some who ask, “How can I feel happiness or joy when there are so many others in this world that are suffering?”

A good question. I think the answer lies in understanding that compassion and joy and other highly developed characteristics do not require that we absorb someone’s suffering or someone’s dark nature. We don’t have to make their expressions our own.

Although it seems natural to empathetically internalize someone’s distress and negativity, that does nothing to reduce their pain, and simply increases our own pain level. It is not like we have some super-hero power where we can absorb someone’s darkness and turn it in to light. That process is theirs alone to initiate. We can hear them, try to understand them, be there for them, support them, and in some cases offer suggestions, but they are responsible for their choices and path.

Another aspect of that question is understanding the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is a feeling based upon the world. We find a wallet with \$500 in it, we feel happy. But we feel joy when we find the owner and return it. Joy is based upon connections to Spirit; happiness is based upon connections to the world. Happiness is not bad; God wants us to be joyful and happy. It is just that joy is deep and persistent and spiritually connected, whereas happiness is more transitory and earthly.

As a Child of God, we can understand the power of spiritual connections, and how they impact lives, hearts, and minds. Compassion, for instance, is generated by recognizing and strengthening the connection between souls and Spirit. It is these spiritual connections that provide pathways for the transmission of joy, love, abundance, peace, and all other aspects of God.

In just a few days most people who celebrate Christmas will be gathering in some way, as a community or a family, and sharing presents. This is a wonderful metaphorical tradition of celebrating the gifts that the birth of Jesus Christ brings to us.

But what if I chose not to open one of the gifts that was given to me? What if I refused to accept it? What if, in all the hustle and bustle of gift giving and receiving, one of my gifts was overlooked? What if it were the exact present that I was looking for, that I needed and wanted the most – the perfect gift?

This is happening to too many of us. Blinded by our life trials many of us overlook one of the most precious and perfect gifts that we could receive: that of God's joy. We leave God's gift of joy, still wrapped in love and peace, under the tree.

I consider Peace, Love, and Joy the Big Three when it comes to the gifts that God gives us. Independently, any one of them is a life-filling endowment. We are offered all three through Christ, and to refuse any of them is a mistake caused by severe lack of understanding. Sadly, some people purposely stop the flow of joy from God by severing their spiritual connections.

Ok, I'll own it: I am not a whiz at wrapping Christmas gifts. Although the edges may be misaligned, and I use tape excessively to cover my mistakes, each gift I give is imbued with love. For me, the giving of a gift is an expression of my love. I give in love, and in exchange I receive joy.

That is a spiritual connection that is clear to me. When we give something to someone, whether it is our time, service, a gift, a hug, or a kind and uplifting word ... when we give in love, we receive joy in direct proportion; it is not from the receiver of the gift that we receive this joy, but from Christ within. Whether they like the gift or not is meaningless at a spiritual level. When we give in love, we receive joy in exchange.

Now at the earthly level, our ego is satisfied when they like the gift that we have given them. Our happiness is amplified by their appreciation and their joy in receiving the gift, because now our human nature is involved as well. Similarly, our earthly happiness is diminished when they show a lack of appreciation. But our spiritual joy is never decreased.

But many of us look for joy at only the earthly level. We confuse happiness for joy when someone shows us appreciation, and we have forgotten how to feel joy at the soul-level. So, when we disregard the connection between our heart and Spirit, we are choosing not to receive the gift of joy that God grants us. We leave the gift under the tree unwrapped.

In our Bible verse, we are commanded to be joyous always – in good times, in bad times; in times of plenty and in times of lack.

James 1:2-3 offers this: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

We are not intended to be enslaved by the tumultuous situations and experiences that earthly life brings. Our ego does not have to be fulfilled for us to be joyful or experience all the higher emotions. Rather, it is through the release of the ego, through letting go of control, that we open the channels of joy.

Emotional pain is caused by the feeling that there is separation between the individual and Spirit. When spirit-connections are closed we are unsettled. Love enables us to open the flow of Spirit and again experience the bond with those who are suffering, therefore permitting our love, peace, and joy to flow.

Joy is a result of connecting to Spirit. An isolated person cannot create joy; it requires a connection for the flow to occur. One person can, however, block a connection, creating a perceived separation, which results in pain. This is why spiritual connection removes pain – it removes the clot so that joy can flow to us, in us, around us, through us, and out of us.

The ego may delight in worldly things, but self-seeking pleasure is not lasting; it ultimately disables the connection to Spirit. For this reason, wealth in and of itself, brings no lasting joy. To chase anything for selfish gain rarely results in lasting satisfaction. It may bring temporary happiness, but not lasting joy.

When we let go of our need to seek joy at the human level, we become open to the feelings of joy at the divine level. When we stop pushing against the wind, fighting for every step, enduring the bite of the dust and sand in our faces just to claim worldly pleasure, and instead simply turn our back and allow the wind to move us along, we are driven forward by spiritual joy; we are guided toward everything that we desire. We are directed and empowered by Christ, and we feel the strength in joy. In Nehemiah 8:10 we are told that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

This change in direction, whether we are fighting the wind or are using the wind, requires a change in our perception. Some people facing poverty react by keeping their bodies, minds, hearts, and their environment as clean as possible despite a temporary lack of resources. They recognize that they are not their situation; they are a Child of God. They may be broke, but they are not poor.

Under the same exact circumstances, other people succumb to depression and fear, and abandon all self-respect and self-worth. They think of themselves as losers and victims, and they fight the wind, resisting every moment.

We had a little card on our refrigerator that said, “After all, it is our attitude in life that brings us joy in living.” If we can develop an attitude of being ‘joyously aware’ then we can change the way we see life, and our life changes. Earl Nightingale said, “Our attitude toward life determines life’s attitude towards us.” When we start looking for joy in our life, we find it.

Max Planck, theoretical physicist and the developer of the quantum theory, states it this way: “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” Wayne Dyer borrowed and developed that idea for our understanding.

Regardless of whether we think we are a naturally joyous person or not, it is my belief that – truly – we are joy-filled beings. With Christ within us, how can we not be? But we must choose to see the world through joyous eyes.

Now, we will express our joy differently from individual to individual. Some people are exceedingly demonstrative in their feelings and reactions. They release joy in an upbeat overt manner. They are always smiling, always outwardly positive. We like hanging out with these people because they make us feel good.

On the other end of the joy spectrum there are people who express it more serenely and sedately. Peace and joy often run closely with them. They may not be as effusive as some other individuals, but nonetheless their joy is palpable. We like associating with these people also, because they make us feel good too.

But then there are those who have not yet unwrapped their gift of joy. While at the soul-level we are all joyous beings, we must first become aware of the joy within us for it to express. We must open the conduit of Love for Joy to flow: give in Love, receive in Joy.

Joy then, is a result of connecting to the love of Spirit. Rather than letting depression, hatred, and negativity win in our lives, we allow Love to win and reign supreme in our life, then joy effuses.

At times, we just have to take a moment and look for the joy. We are so accustomed to examining the errant things in life – the fearful things, and the things that have gone wrong and are going wrong – that we fail to recognize the positive joyful things all around us.

Patrice Gifford offers these words of wisdom: “It is always wise to stop wishing for things long enough to enjoy the fragrance of those now flowering.”

As our awareness of joy expands, we realize we are surrounded by things, people, and circumstances that can bring us joy. We can expand our awareness by deliberately slowing down to taste our food, enjoy a piece of music or a sunset. We can remind ourselves of the joy in simplicity, the joy in living. We can become living expressions of joy as we tap into the reborn Christ within us. The rebirthing of the Christ reveals the blessings of God’s gifts in our lives, and our hearts and minds respond with thanksgiving and joy.

So, Christmas Day approaches and we will soon receive and give our presents. My prayer is that amidst the festivities, ribbons, wrapping paper, and Christmas presents, that we accept the gifts that Christ brings to us – the peace, the love, and the joy – not allowing any of them to remain overlooked or unwrapped.

Joy to the world, and Joy to each of you!

Let us pray....