

WRCOB
July 19, 2020
Risk Joy
Philippians 1:3-11, James 1:2-4

Today we continue our fruit of the spirit series with the topic Risk Joy. Joy has seemed illusive these last few months, hasn't it? From the corona virus to social unrest, to health issues that are complicated by the virus to hard decisions about opening schools and businesses, it's been a challenging year, and we're all feeling it. So this morning, we are going to talk about how to recover or maintain joy in the midst of challenging times. First, let's get clear on what joy is and what it is not and how it is different from happiness.

Happiness tends to be externally triggered, and is usually based on other people, things, and events. When we say, I'm happy that my grandchildren are coming to visit, or I'm happy that businesses are reopening, these are examples of external sources of happiness. On the flip side, as we noted a minute ago, there are lots of externally triggered events that make us unhappy.

Joy on the other hand, comes from God, not from external things. It is a deeper fruit that should not be affected by our circumstances. It comes from knowing that God walks with us and strengthens us, no matter what we face.

In Scripture, the Psalms talk about joy and rejoicing more than other book in the Bible. But the psalms are also full of lament ó times when people pour out their pain and sorrow to God and plead for God's help. One of the first things I want us to note about joy this morning is that risking joy doesn't mean that we deny the reality of our circumstances. It doesn't mean that we show up at church and smile and say that everything is fine when it's not. Seeking joy is not "faking it until we make it."

I also want to be very clear that sometimes we have medical issues that make it hard to experience joy. Sometimes people have a chemical imbalance that results in depression, or sometimes we are prescribed steroids that keep us tense and on edge. Please hear me say that these are medical issues, not spiritual ones. I believe that prayer can indeed help in these situations, and that God can heal ó but often that healing comes through science and proper medical care.

So joy is a fruit that comes from God and transcends the circumstances that we face. That's the good news. But not surprisingly, Scripture offers us a challenge as well. In the book of James, the apostle writes, "Consider it nothing but joy whenever you face trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you.

This is where most of us will probably get prickly today. And, unfortunately, I'll be the first to confess, joy is not my default response when I face trials, is it yours? I may get there eventually, but it is rarely if ever my first response. Interestingly, I learned this week that in this passage, James is addressing the community's faith, not the faith of individual believers. So in this case, enduring trials with joy is not the demonstration of a single person's moral character, but a community's commitment to God as its source of being and worth. What would it mean then, for us, as a faith community to risk joy when we face trials as a family of believers? How will we face with joy working through the pandemic, re-visioning our mission, and calling a new pastor?

Working through challenges and trials with joy is hard for us to imagine ó either individually or collectively, because we seek every way we can to avoid suffering, don't we? If

we are honest, we often long for a faith that is free from trials and tests, but James reminds us that this is how we grow and mature. Whether we like it or not, he's right. We don't grow when things are easy, growth happens when we are working through challenges. I encourage us all to take some time this week to reflect on how we have grown during this pandemic. As a church we've certainly shown adaptability and flexibility, and in the absence of full-time staff, you have answered the call to care for each other admirably and joyfully. What have you learned about yourself? How have you responded to this crisis and how are you growing?

Perhaps no one in Scripture models joy amidst challenges and suffering more than the apostle Paul. Earlier we heard Philippians 1:3-11. The defining characteristic of this short letter is joy. In fact, he uses the words joy or rejoice 14 times. This is remarkable since Paul wrote the letter while he was imprisoned. It was likely that his court trial was years away, and it was also likely that the outcome would be a death sentence. This might be where Paul spent the remainder of his earthly life.

Even before this moment, Paul's journey as a Christian was not easy. After his conversion, the Christian community was rightly wary of him as we talked about a few weeks ago, his conversion from persecutor to missionary was dramatic and abrupt. In II Corinthians he listed some of the challenges he routinely faced: afflictions, hardships, calamities (including a ship wreck), beatings, three imprisonments, riots, hunger, and sleepless nights are all on the list.

Now, I'm sure that Paul had bad days; he was quite human and unloaded some pretty strong words on the churches in his letters. But despite his significant trials, Paul remained joyful. He begins this letter by pouring out his heart in gratitude for all that God has done and is continuing to do. He remembers the Philippians with joy, confidence, and a love that is much

more than human affection, indeed these are qualities that come from Christ and the Holy Spirit working in Paul.

In fact, he continues in verse 12 of chapter 1, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." A few verses later he adds, "and yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." That friends, is joy from God.

So how in the world do we begin to risk that kind of joy? Yes, joy is a gift from the spirit, but as we have said several times in the last few weeks, we have a role to play. We have the responsibility of opening ourselves up to receiving it. Often, like with this pandemic and many other challenges, we can't control what happens to us. But we can control our response to what happens. Although it is challenging, I hope that we can each begin to move to the place where we see trials as opportunities for growth. What if we routinely asked, "God what might you want to teach me as we walk through this time together?" What if we could discipline ourselves to pray, "God help me to risk joy, to find joy, and claim joy in the middle of this circumstance?" Again, that doesn't mean that we aren't honest about the difficulty or that we plaster that fake smile on our faces, but we seek to rejoice in a deeper sense of God's presence and provision.

There is another way that we can work on building our capacity for joy. Col 3:17 offers us this challenge, "Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him." First Corinthians says it this way "do all to the glory of God. (Pause)

Think of the joy we could have in our lives and in our work if we chose to do all that we did "whether we are employed or retired" for God. Think of what a ministry and testimony we would have if every day we sought to do our job "whatever it was" to the glory of God. How might our lives be different if we started every day with the prayer, "God, help me to be at peace with you and with myself today, fill me with your joy, and help me to do this job for you "in a way that will bring you glory."

That would be a real switch for many of us wouldn't it? But there are many benefits to this orientation. First, it would remove much of our cause for grumbling, because working for God "not just for our bosses or our paychecks" will bring us joy. Seeing our work as an opportunity to serve God will also eliminate much of our temptation to cut corners or be dishonest in any way "because to do so would be to cheat God. (PAUSE) Are you beginning to see how this orientation changes everything? If you were an employer, wouldn't you love to have a company full of employees who showed up with this mindset every day?

And here will be the result. If you approach your job as your ministry, as a way to serve God, you will be different. People will notice. And eventually they will ask. "What about you is different? You seem so concerned for others and so dedicated to your work, what motivates you?" And then you will have a natural way to share your faith. You don't get that chance by showing up at work with a bull horn and preaching, you earn the right to share by living out your vocation with joy.

Of course, this same attitude extends to what we do at home, with our children, our grandchildren, or our parents, and with our volunteer and community work. Are you dreading dealing with the doctors and insurance companies related to your parent's medical issue? Do you struggle when you think about corralling the kids for play rehearsal or encouraging them to get their chores done? Go with joy, knowing that it is a way to serve God and you will make a joyful difference.

One of the people who brings this spirit of joy to his work is Tim Harris. For five years, he owned a restaurant in New Mexico called Tim's Place ó where they served breakfast, lunch and hugs. Tim, who has Down's syndrome, would be quick to tell you that hugs are the best part. His parents said that when he was fourteen Tim told them he wanted to open a restaurant, and he reports, "I do not let my disabilities crush my dreams." To date, he is the only person with those challenges to own a restaurant. Dancing joyfully across the parking at 7:00 each morning, Tim can't wait to welcome diners with hugs and a smile. Tim's Place closed in December 2015 ó at the closing bell, the official hug counter read 75,402.

Despite achieving his dream, Tim has faced other significant challenges. He closed the restaurant in 2015 to move to Denver to be with his girlfriend. He planned to open a new concept restaurant there. Unfortunately, the relationship didn't work out, and Tim admits he struggled with discouragement and depression for a season. Now he works part time at a local restaurant, welcoming diners and his loyal fans with, you got it, hugs. He is a Special Olympics athlete, he'll tell you he has more gold medals than Michael Phelps, and he travels widely speaking about disability, achievements and joy.

So the fruit of the spirit is joy. May we all allow God to cultivate and grow it in our hearts, that all we do may glorify Christ and draw others to God. Amen.

