

## **“O Joy, Where art thou?”**

**Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor – Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 12/20/2020**

*Luke 4:16-20*

In such times of uncertainty, pain, and suffering, increasing divisions, racial strife, seemingly insurmountable injustice, how can we possibly talk about joy? I think it is fair to say that we must not speak about “joy” in isolation of our reality, just as we cannot speak about peace without discussing the need for justice. And with joy, I feel to better understand it, it would be best if we dived a bit into its essence and carefully unwrap its meaning and function for our lives today, and to do so soberly, without pretense, without disassociating it from our current reality.

I feel our context is not entirely unlike the time in which Jesus lived. He came into a politically polarized time as well, where racial oppression abounded. Jesus was born in less than perfect circumstances. He was a child, though a product of holy conception, who suffered undoubtedly by the taboo questions surrounding his birth. People knew the timeline didn’t add up, just as people know today (even though our culture is typically less judgmental, I hope, these days). Though when there is an early pregnancy in a newly wed’s life together, how many of us resort to one of the oldest forms of “judgment” by adding up the months to see how they coincide with the marriage-vow timeline? Shame on us. That’s none of our business, right? But yet we do it, just like I’m sure everyone in Jesus’ day did too. People knew. The timeline didn’t add up. Jesus was born in less than perfect circumstances as far as the world was concerned, conceived out of wedlock, born in a stinky barn—homeless, and soon to be hurled into Egypt as a refugee with his parents. So, yes, less than perfect, and full of political strife. It certainly didn’t seem like a joyous time, right?

And yet, even with those incredible hurdles, Jesus’ small family survived and eventually landed in Nazareth, safely. But Jesus learned valuable lessons, no doubt, from the struggles his family endured—I would surmise, anyway. Jesus learned of compassionate living. He learned an empathy that not all of us have the privilege of learning at such a young age, but there is little doubt that Jesus didn’t experience it. He was born into poverty and instability, and lived that way for a number of years growing up. By the time he arrived to Nazareth as a young boy, he had experienced more than most. He was born homeless. His adoptive father scrambling to provide for his small family in Bethlehem, a strange town he did not know—forced to depend on the compassion of others. Then only to be uprooted and forced to flee when a great massacre of violence was visited upon it by the king at the time. Saving their little boy Jesus, they fled to a foreign country in neighboring Egypt and having to live there for some years until his safety could be assured, they again had to depend on the kindness of others. So, Jesus empathy was not contrived, it was lived... it was not conjured it up or fabricated, it was born out of necessity. So, in his new home, where they had to start again, depended on the kindness of strangers again... in Nazareth now, and now a man himself, standing in his own synagogue, he simply read God’s Good News to the world, the Gospel that we are all to carry, the mission we are all to bear... truly, compassionate living.

Our founder Bev Cosby believed strongly that joy cannot come from anything but brazen honesty. I believe this mirrored the teachings of Jesus in what God wants for us. When Jesus tells the woman at

the well that God seeks “true worshippers, those who worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4). The word “truth” is more accurately replaced with “honesty” or even better, “authenticity.” God seeks folks who enter the sacred communion with their spirit and their own authenticity. Be honest about who you are. Do not hide it! Nearly 35 years ago, Bev said, “Our joy comes as we raise and face the most real questions of human existence and as we live with and live out those questions, as we let God come to us as we engage in these struggles... The questions we ask and the way we ask them, and the spirit of openness with which we approach them are much more crucial than formulating answers to questions that no one may ever be asking” (1/6/1985). Compassionate living requires honesty in who we are, our real experiences, and not hiding behind a facade. Authentic questions trump fake, contrived answers. Jesus was honest and this led to compassionate living.

There is more than enough suffering in this world to last many lifetimes, and joining in solidarity with Jesus’ own quoting of the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4), we know that our mission is to preach “good news” while relieving the pain of the suffering, breaking chains (breaking oppressive systems that cause suffering), and restoring people back to mental, physical, and spiritual health. This is the Gospel! Bev, again, reminds us that joy doesn’t live in isolation from reality, but its function is critical to restoration. He says, “We are called to lift the quality of another’s spirit... It is not enough to just relieve pain; it is possible to do that without transmitting joy. It is not enough to work for wholeness from fragmentation; to do that may not issue joy, though it may help. It is not enough just to precipitate growth and change; change often brings pain in itself. We are to be the bearers of joy and exhilaration wherever we are” (1/13/1985). And that is the hard part. As Christ brought joy to the lives of so many suffering, we are to do the same. Those who are suffering need our smiles, need our hugs, need our tears of compassion, need our sacrifice. They need our love, but they also need our joy.

But how can we give joy when we do not feel joyous? This is only comes from your own journey into the depths of honesty in Christ. We must dig deep into our inward journey, discover who we are—who we really are—and accept ourselves, then our outward journey will reflect that the acceptance of our own “spirit” in its “authenticity” brings freedom, and freedom brings joy. Some will say, “I thought it was by ‘accepting God or Christ’ that brings freedom?” No. God doesn’t need your acceptance. You need your acceptance of yourself. God already accepts what God has created, that is, God accepts you—now you must accept yourself. Do not hate that which God loves. When Jesus said, “Deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me,” Jesus is saying, “Accept yourself for who you really are, recognize your light and your shadows, and then remove your ego, and humbly follow God.” Do not forget that you are, “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Self-loathing is a false god in and of itself. Self-loathing is really self-loving but in an unhealthy way. It is through that path that we become victims in our minds, and everything suddenly revolves around us. Rather, by understanding ourselves, accepting ourselves, and understanding our relationship with our Creator, we emerge in harmony, abiding in Christ as Christ abides in the Creator. We find symbiotic communion and healthy presence with one another. And along this path we will find joy. Our love for one another feeds that joy. Compassionate living produces that joy. Of this Jesus said, “Go and bear much fruit, fruit that will last.” This fruit in John 15 is simple, “love one another as I have loved you.”