

The Joy We Find

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church, UCC - Brunswick, ME

Sunday September 30, 2018

Scripture: *Luke 15:1–10* (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Luke%2015:1-10>)

Introduction to the Scripture

We're continuing on with our exploration of those "fruits of the spirit" that the Apostle Paul lifts up in Galatians. The fruits of the spirit were meant to be a way for the early church to look to what its life and work were producing, or growing to see if they were being nurtured in the way of the Spirit. Some of these fruits have become things we associate with activity these days: generosity or self-control, maybe... some have become emotions for us... love, and, this week, "joy." Joy is one of those really complex feelings or experiences that challenges us to define it.

One of the reasons I say that joy, at least as the church understood it, is complex is because it's a word that Jesus uses with a definite pattern. To Jesus, joy is the celebratory after effect of God's reclaiming and restoring love and activity in the world. Nowhere is this more clear than in Luke's 15th chapter, often just called "the Lost" chapter... a series of parables about restoration and joy... we will hear a bit... given what's going on with me, I figured we could skip the Prodigal Son.

Sermon

Like many, I suspect that the news of our week has not been conducive to the feeling and expressing of joy. Whatever else we might say of joy, it is not always easy to experience... or to recall. I also want to say if this is a season of your life in which you are struggling to experience joy at all... you are not alone, and you have pastors and a community that will listen, and sit with you, and hold you in that. You are not alone if you feel joyless.

Some good news for those of us here...

New study results show that people who attended religious services at least weekly in childhood and adolescence were about 18 percent more likely to report higher happiness as young adults (ages 23–30) than those who never attended services.

[<https://www.pressherald.com/2018/09/28/kids-who-attend-religious-services-are-happier-adults/>](Press Herald)

I am going to guess that worshipping in community (whether or not they continue to worship) allowed them to gain experiences of meditation, of prayer, of self reflection... that allowed them to find that happiness they reported in the midst of challenges.

I mention this because before our young people go off to college or work, we have a gathering of parents and mentors and youth... and I wish them joy... recognizing that going far from home for the first time will involve a lot of sorrow, of loss, of experiment and failure, and of fun, adventure, happiness, and joy. To make those last two clear, I often use this—perhaps too simple—description.

Happiness is ice cream, right here before you. It is wonderful, and delicious... and then it is gone. **Joy** is the milkshakes that my father would buy for the two of us for lunch when there was a snow day, but he still had to go into to his school to work.

Happiness was all those parts of my brain that lit up when the sugar hit me. Joy is partly memory that connects me to my father, that taught me about celebrating even while you show up with your people when they have hard things they need to do—like go into work when all the rest of the world has called out. That showed me how to serve a community while rejoicing in the common labor with others. That simply showed me I was loved. I will never actually get those moments back... they're lost to me... but I am not lost to the work of them. Those memories, in all their complexity are, for me, joy, because they have left me changed... and stay with me, continuing to change me as I live and grow.

So I send our young people off with that question and challenge: to not simply hunt for—or measure their lives by—happiness... but to look for joy. Understanding that joy will often come in the complexity of loss and grief, but also love and connection.

It is tempting for us to say that happiness is a thing, whereas joy is a memory, or an experience, or a relationship... but I want to argue that—like all the fruits of the spirit—it is a practice. A practice of mining our lives for the possibility and meaning of change and growth in relationship with each other and with God.

When we are able to practice joy, it has a lot to do with what I would call “resilience”: our ability to persevere. The sense that whatever the state of your story, it is not over yet. For God has a way of continuing stories that others are so sure they have silenced or ended.

Joy and hope, then, are close friends, and joy often is a food for hope.

It has been a week to impressed by resilience... to mine for joy. We have seen the strength of women telling hard truths of stories of sexual abuse and assault. We have seen men managing self-reflection as to where we have failed to act against, or where we have even acted for a culture of abuse and diminishment of women, and managing commitment to be a part of change going forward. I have been impressed by testimony that people have given to our elected leaders, and those leaders ability to actually hear and strive to act justly.

Under that, are innumerable sources of joy... families of love and nurture which held people as they came to grips with their own pain, and as they rooted themselves in courage to tell of it; partners trusting and being vulnerable and imperfect with each other; a whole culture calling ourselves to wonder how to do better.

In our house the other night, we noticed there are 100 senators. One of them had an interesting adventure on the way to the elevator. In the midst of the wrenching pain of this week's senate testimonies, Maria Gallagher and Ana Maria Archila left behind the ninety-nine and came upon Jeff Flake of Arizona. They told their stories of assault and of pain. He listened. Somewhere between him,

and them, and a friend, Senator Chris Coons... something happened. I don't know what will happen, but regardless of party affiliation, or ideology, I want to say that I found some joy in the very possibility that people, sharing their stories with each other, might compromise and even change their minds a little. Even amongst a politics that insists that we should never change our minds, and those who think differently than we do are forever to be lost to us.

Indeed, in both of the parables of joy we hear from Jesus today, we hear that joy comes at the very possibility of being changed by the other, of being changed by the experience of being found. There is a lot of talk about sinners in this passage, and in our culture, in which certain theologies of sin have managed to capture the airwaves and the imagination, I know that can bring up old hurts. Nonetheless, I need to say that when Jesus talks about sinners, he talks about finding lost treasures... he talks about people who too often have been told they are disposable, that the authorities say God is all but done with, but to God they are worth everything.

It is important to note that Jesus doesn't tell stories about sheep that finally learned how to stay with the herd or a coin that... well, I don't know, learned not to roll off the nightstand. These stories are about a shepherd and a woman who will not cease looking for what is lost until it is found. These stories are to tell us, and the high authorities of Jesus's time, that God doesn't go around waiting for people to get it right. God doesn't wait for us to change before we are connected to the heart of God... God goes on the hunt. God puts out a search and rescue team, and even does that thing where you push the couch back and flip the coffee table over... and that experience of God's transforming love that will not stop looking for us? Changes us, and calls us to home and to an extravagant joy: both the shepherd and the woman with ten coins throw a party for friends and family to rejoice in what they have found **spending even more than was lost in the first place**: an overflowing of joy.

A few weeks ago, my home church, The Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, the church that my parents still attended, the church that ordained me as came to minister with you all... well, they had a meeting. The congregation unanimously came to face up to realities of a huge building, and a small congregation, and shrinking resources... and they decided to close the congregation, and as one body, "transplant" themselves to another congregation. It was a fateful, and faithful decision... it wasn't made quickly, or easily. I think it was the right decision.

Nonetheless, I have, in the midst of a few other transitions in my life, been coming to grips with the reality that I will never *quite* be able to return to the church which... found me... when I was most assuredly lost. I am sad about it. And sometimes feel lonely at its loss.

But it is not lost. The joy of that community has called me and multiple dozens of others into ministry, it has been a place of healing and discovery, it has been a place of singing and of prayer. It is still in the lives of its people, that church, when I mine my life, my memories, who I was and who I am now... and there I find the joy of that congregation,

I say all this, partly because I am leaving soon. As Mary said in her too kind Some of our children have been asking if I will forget them. I will not. I hope you won't forget me. I hope that in the midst of the things we have celebrated or lost, in the ways in which I have been a help, and even in the ways I have failed... you will find... joy.

This is what we can be called to: the joyful living of life that finds the beauty even in passing moments, in challenges and changes, and opening ourselves to what we may be becoming because of the life and struggles and joy we share.

When we think the story is over, it is not.

One night, the Jesus of John's gospel say to his disciples... before the cross... before the tomb... At the end, or what seems to be the end, he says, "So you have sorrow now, but I will come again, and then no one will take your joy from you." We find joy over and over again in the promise that whatever seems like the end of our story, it is not the end of *God's story with us*... We can grieve, lose, fail, leave, even die... but the joy we have known in one another cannot truly be taken away... and the story is not over... God's Easter joy has been, and is, and ever shall be... joy without end.

Amen.