Ways of Faith 8- O Be Joyful

Unity Church August 31, 2025

Psalm 121 Galatians 5:22

As we end this series on Ways of Faith, I’d like to come full circle. We started with the need for gratitude in our lives, if I recall we spent two Sundays looking at all we have to be grateful for. I said at the time that before we get serious about prayer, scripture reading, and meditation, we need to approach them with a spirit of gratitude. Something that gratitude feeds into and I’m convinced is a hallmark of a deep healthy faith walk, is joy.

All of us, and I’m as guilty as the next person, tend to get caught up in the drudgery, aggravation, anger and frustration of our daily lives. You know the routine: you get up in the morning, the sun is shining, the birds are singing, your dog is happy to see you, you’re at peace with the world. The phone rings, you go to work, someone says or does something and you think to yourself, “You know, 15 minutes ago, I wasn’t mad at nobody.” Like a snowflake, a shadow or a wisp of smoke, it’s gone. All the joy, peace, love, happiness evaporates, like someone turned on a giant vacuum cleaner.

I’ve often wondered how something as wonderful as joy can be so fragile, so fleeting. I’ve also wondered why people who have miserable circumstances, illness, pain, financial troubles, can be so joyful. How can people who are blessed be so miserable, and people who should be miserable be so joyful? In my wonderings comes the question: Is joy something that just happens, like sunshine on your shoulders, or is it something that we choose, something that we decide on?

I keep coming back to, “Where is our joy, and why aren’t we more joyful?” I think it comes from what we’re looking at, what we are concentrating on. It comes from a life of playing defense, busy protecting what is ours, or what we think is ours. We have a thousand reasons to be downtrodden and long faced. Financial and health worries, stresses about relationships, anger over some situation, the list could be a mile long. I can hear someone saying that if I don’t understand why people are upset, I just don’t understand the situation.

1

We are, both individually and as a group, loved by our heavenly Father, God. He not only owns the cattle on a thousand hills, he owns our lives and everything about them. By realization that we say that we believe in God and His son Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, our lives rest in Him. Like the scripture says, “if God be for us, who can be against us?” Where’s our joy?

We know that our lives are not our own, they belong to Christ. Paul tells us that to live is Christ, that we died with Christ, and that we live through Him. I have the same financial concerns that any one else does, but I know that worrying about them won’t change them one bit. By giving them back to God, I can let the only one who is able to deal with them worry about them. Physically, I’m not 25 years old anymore. It’s no fun getting older, but can any of us lengthen our days by worrying or fussing about it? If I have died with Christ and live with Christ, I might wish that I had the strength and stamina of a 25 year old, but it’s really not important. Frankly, I’d rather have the wisdom of life’s experience than be doing the things I did back then.

I’m not suggesting that we walk around with our heads in the clouds, being, as my mother used to say, “so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.” What I’m saying is that we claim to be children of God, washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit. Somewhere in that realization, it’s attending joy and peace should show itself. If we are loved by God, saved by Christ, and know the Holy Spirit, we will bear his mark, and also bear his fruit. One of the fruits of the Spirit, according to Galatians 5:22, is joy.

This joy is not something that we paint on our faces every Sunday morning, you know, walk in with what I used to call “church face.” No, it’s a quiet joy, a spirit of peace, of unflappability. Something born of a deep realization of whose we are, and that we stand, sit and die in that surrounding love of God shown to us through Jesus Christ. An understanding that because we live in this reality, we will not sweat the small stuff and most of it is small stuff.

Let’s spend some time looking at what “Joy” is. According to Strongs Exhaustive Concordance, there are 9 different Hebrew words that are translated into English as “Joy.” So for the next hour and half, let’s exegete the meanings behind each of them. Just checking if you’re listening. No we will not exegete each of them. Instead, I have two definitions of biblical joy from two online Bible commentaries, Theopedia, and Patheos.

2

Theopedia: “Joy is a state of mind and an orientation of the heart. It is a settled state of contentment, confidence and hope. It is something or someone that provides a source of happiness. It appears 240 to 260 times in the Bible, depending on the translation.”

Patheos: “Joy isn’t like happiness which is based upon happenings or whether things are going well or not. No, joy remains even amidst the suffering. Joy is not happiness. Joy is an emotion that’s acquired by the anticipation, acquisition or even the expectation of something great or wonderful.”

Let me highlight a couple of things: “(Joy) is a settled state of contentment, confidence and hope. Joy remains even amidst the suffering. It is acquired by the anticipation, acquisition or even the expectation of something great or wonderful.”

I’m reminded of the scripture from 2 Timothy 1:12, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I’ve committed unto Him, against that day.”

Early on in this series I spoke about a second naïveté, which Brant writes about in the book we’re working through in Sunday School, Life is hard, God is Good, Let’s Dance.

People often think that believers have their heads in the clouds when it comes to dealing with the realities of life. That they are naive. Brant argues that what appears as naïveté is in fact a realization that because God is control and He is able, regardless of what happens, it will all work out. These people, who the world thinks are naive, will further argue that not only will it work out alright, it will be better than what it could possibly be without divine assistance.

Romans 8:28, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.” Most of you have heard me say that the past 33 years of my life has been a training ground which ultimately brought me to this place, this pulpit. I am not alone in this. Each of you have a similar story. Not everything in those 33 years has been tea and roses, but I’m not smart enough to edit out what was or wasn’t a teachable moment. I suspect the hard parts, the struggles, the parts I’d rather not have gone through are the places where the most education took place.

3

Which leads me back to the definition I read from Patheos: “Joy isn’t like happiness which is based upon happenings or whether things are going well or not. No, joy remains even amidst the suffering. Joy is not happiness.” I think we tend to confuse the two of them.

Radio and TV evangelists tend to get caught up in the idea that if I’m right with God, everything will be hunky dory. To hear some of them tell it, your business will thrive, your kids will be well behaved and your teeth won’t get cavities.

Those of us who are a little more skeptical, possibly cynical, those who have been kicked by life and reality now and again tend to question this argument. Some question their faith when unhappy things occur, “Why is this happening to me,” sort of thing.

Quite a few of us, raised in Calvinism, will respond, “Of course bad things happen to us, we are unworthy and capable of all manner of depravity. It is only through unearned grace that we are saved.” This argument, although true needs to be countered by Psalm 103, “As a father pities his children, so does our father pity us,” and “ He does not deal with us according to our iniquity.” (To which I say, Thank God.)

Jesus said in Matthew 5:45, “He makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” In other words, and we struggle to accept this reality, Life happens. People get cancer, people die, cars get sideswiped, businesses fail, infidelity happens, and on and on. Life is hard. The question becomes what do we do with these challenges, calamities and afflictions. I’m afraid that it is at these junctures where we really have to ask the question, “Where is our joy?”

Although Joy is described as an emotion like happiness, sadness, etc. I think that more than an emotion, Joy has to become a state of mind, a way of life. I’ve said before that an emotion is not logical because it’s an emotion, a feeling. I think more than an emotion, joy and being joyful needs to become our default position. That is, our recollection of God’s interaction in our personal lives, the things that we talked about previously that make us grateful, are the benchmarks, the foundation of what gives us that second naivete, that knowledge that God has helped me before and I see no reason why he will not help me again. In that conscious choice, we open ourselves to the gift of Joy.

4

I come back to a revised Psalm 121 “I lift up mine eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let my foot be moved, he who keeps me will not slumber. He who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. The Lord is my keeper: the Lord is the shade on my right hand. The Sun shall not smite me by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep me from all evil: He will keep my life. The Lord will keep my going out and my coming in from this time forth and for evermore.”

In this realization, and I can cite numerous other Psalms and scripture that says basically the same thing, in this experience, in this knowledge, resides the gift of Joy. The foundation of our approach to praying, reading scripture and meditating on it.

Our God is an Awesome God.

Amen!

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in  
  from this time forth and for evermore.

Galatians 5:22-23

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.