

“Joy in an Age of Despair”

Sermon Series – Fresh Produce #3

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First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC

May 2, 2021

(John 15:5-11)

Introduction.

Think of a time in your life when you experienced great joy. What is the most joyful day you can remember? Maybe it was when you made the team, or you received your acceptance to college. Or perhaps it was the day when he asked, “Will you marry me?” or she said, “Yes!” and your heart skipped a beat. Or maybe it was when your first child was born, and the sight of that newborn brought tears of joy to your eyes. Perhaps it was the first time you saw something that took your breath away like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite National Park, or a beautiful sunrise or sunset.

What about this past year? Can you identify a day when you experienced joy even during the pandemic? Joy may have been hard to come by with COVID-19. Without a doubt the most joyous day for me during the pandemic was last Spring, on May 24th, when Cyndy and I were married in the chapel of our church, and many of you joined us for the livestream of the ceremony. After all that Cyndy and I have been through in losing our spouses, to find love like this again at our age has brought more joy than we could have dreamed or imagined. God is so good.

C.S. Lewis once said that joy is the serious business of heaven. I love that thought. But I would also suggest to you that joy is the serious business of earth for the followers of Jesus Christ as well. God wants us to experience joy. It’s a fruit of the Spirit. But why is it that so few of us experience much joy in this life? Why do we struggle to be joyful at times? And where can find joy today? That’s what I want to talk about this morning.

I. The Gift of Joy.

Joy. What an amazing gift it is. When it’s present, our lives are richer, and when it’s absent there’s an emptiness in our souls. Joy is a complex subject, and in some ways it’s hard to define. But once you’ve experienced it, once you’ve tasted its fruit, there’s a longing in your heart to want to know and experience it again and again for the rest of your life.

We often confuse joy with its cousin, happiness. It’s easy to do. Outwardly they resemble one another, but happiness comes from the root word “hap,” which means “chance.” Good things might happen to you, but it’s really a matter of chance. Happiness is something that the world can provide, but life can also take it away or destroy it.

Christian joy is different. It expresses itself in a felling, but it’s often deeper than a felling. It’s like knowing a secret. It’s a deep gladness. It’s a delight, a great contentment. There is something about joy which is beyond our outward circumstances, and even beyond our feelings. And joy is a reservoir in our hearts, a river that never ceases to flow.

C.S. Lewis was fascinated with the idea of "joy," and he entitled his autobiography which detailed his conversion from atheism to Christianity *Surprised by Joy*. Listen to what he writes:

"In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else....it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is."¹

Joy is a delight in life that runs deeper than pleasure or pain, and from a biblical perspective, it isn't limited by nor tied solely to external circumstances. Joy is a gift of God, and like all His other inner gifts, it can be experienced even in the midst of difficult circumstances. I'll give you an example, and it has to do with the teaching of Jesus.

II. Jesus' Teaching on Joy.

When Jesus met with His disciples in the upper room the night before His death, He spoke with them about joy. I think it took them by surprise, as joy often does. Jesus told the disciples of His impending separation from them, and He tried to prepare them for the horror of His trial and His death on the cross, and the disappointments and devastation that awaited all of them. Nevertheless, it was in this dangerous moment that Christ told them about joy.

In John 15 we read that Jesus said to His disciples, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

In this passage we see that the love of God in Christ and the joy of Jesus which we can experience in Him are somehow tied together. There is a link between abiding in Christ, living in alignment with God's will, and our experience of joy. Using a metaphor, Jesus explained that just as a branch needs to remain connected to the vine in order to live and become fruitful, so His disciples needed to stay connected to Jesus. If you and I don't maintain a vital connection with Christ, and if we don't live in a way that pleases God, we shouldn't be surprised if we don't experience much joy in our lives. Instead, we will live at the mercy of our circumstances, and life will be a constant roller-coaster of emotions in which it's hard to find a spiritual equilibrium.

The title of my sermon today is "Joy in an Age of Despair." Some of you may wonder, "How can we rejoice when there is so much injustice in the world, when there are so many tears because of brokenness? How can we talk about joy when there is so much suffering and when so many people have died at the hands of a senseless virus like Covid-19? Is there really such a thing as joy in an age of despair?"

The answer is "Yes!" When we look at what Jesus said to His disciples here in the upper room, what we find is that joy isn't just some form of high-octane happiness. It isn't happiness on steroids. And it isn't some kind of opiate intended to keep people from caring about what's wrong with the world. Biblical joy, the joy we read about in Scripture, the joy that Jesus talks

about in this passage, is a defiant, refusing to give up, stubborn confidence that the God of the universe is working to put all things to rights which results in a settled state of mind and heart that is sometimes emotional and other times simply peaceful. And it comes from abiding in Christ.

Do you know that kind of joy? Have you experienced the joy of Jesus? You can, and it begins with a relationship with Christ and abiding in Him.

III. When Can You Experience Joy?

At the beginning of my sermon, I asked you to think of a time in your life when you experienced joy? What if I were to suggest to you that the most joyful day of your life can be the one you're living right now? And it's not because your life is problem-free, or because you're watching this livestream from some pristine beach, but because this day is the only one you've got. Every other day you've lived – as good as the memories may be, that day is gone, and you'll never get it back. Today is the only day you've really got to find joy.

My friend Bryan Dunagan says that there are people who obsess over something that happened in their past, and they have difficulty finding joy today. It may have been something that was really great, or it may have been something that was awful, but they focus on it in an inordinate way, and it dominates their life. Other people spend their lives waiting for something to happen that's just around the corner, and they think, "If only I can get that job, make that sale, fall in love with that person, buy that house, then my life will be full of joy." But this day, the one that you and I are living right now, this is the one you have at this moment. And if you're going to experience God's joy then it's got to be today.

Psalm 118 says, *"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it"* (Ps. 118:34). Notice that the psalmist doesn't say, "Yesterday is the day the Lord has made," or "Tomorrow is going to be the day that the Lord will make." Today is the day. The one day God has given you to find joy in Him is today. It's the day that we're living right now.

Do you know who gets this better than anyone else? Our children and our grandchildren. Cyndy and I were visiting my son Jason and his family a couple of weeks ago, and we got to be with my granddaughters Mille, who is five, and Lucy, who just turned three. They call me Papa Pete, and they call Cyndy "Cyndy Lou Who" – "Cyndy Woo Who, will you come color with me?"

For my three-year-old granddaughter Lucy, the greatest day of her life is always today. She doesn't reminisce about the vacation her family took a year ago, and she's not all that concerned about the days ahead when things might get back to normal and this pandemic is behind us. Her favorite day is always today. I want to add a little more of that perspective to my life.

Every moment is a gift from God, and today is the only day we really have, friends. And this is the day we are to rejoice in God. I encourage you later on today to find a way to experience joy in your life. You might want to call a loved one or celebrate with your kids with a little happy dance or take a walk in Reynolda Gardens and enjoy the outdoors, or look through some old photographs and take delight in the special people God has placed in your life and the wonderful experiences you've been able to have. Find some joy and do it today.

IV. Joy is a Choice.

The Christian life isn't merely a summons to become a moral person, nor is it simply a call to duty. Rather, the Christian life is an invitation to enter into the joy of God Himself through a relationship with Jesus Christ and to experience intimacy by His Spirit with the One who is joy itself. Our obedience to Jesus and our experience of His joy will come as a result of delighting in God and sharing in the wonder of having a personal relationship with the Lord Himself. God wants to give us the joy of intimacy with Him in all the fullness of His grace. Sadly, too many Christians act like they were baptized in lemon juice. If they have the joy of the Lord in their hearts, their faces haven't gotten the message!

In many ways I think joy is a choice. Either we choose to surrender our hearts to Jesus and claim His joy for our lives by abiding in Christ, or we choose to live in disobedience to God's Word and forfeit this precious gift. And if we are living in a way that is contrary to what Scripture teaches, we should not be surprised when we lack joy.

Joy can be ours even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Regardless of what is happening around us and to us, our hearts can still know the joy of Christ. In talking to His disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus went on to say, *"You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy....Now is your time for grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. I have said this to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"* (Jn. 16:20-24,33). Scripture also says that for the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, and He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:2).

The calling of our Lord is to choose joy, even on the difficult days, even in the face of hardship. Jesus did that, and He invites His followers to do the same. Let me tell you the story of a person who was able to do this. Barbara Johnson was a very funny lady. She's been described as the Erma Bombeck of the Christian world. Listen to the titles of some of her books – *Splashes of Joy in the Cesspools of Life*, *Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and be Happy!*, and *Fresh Elastic for Stretched-Out Moms*. She brought joy to thousands of people with her books and talks at women's conferences before her death a few years ago.

However, life was not all that easy for Barbara. Many years ago, she felt anything but joyful. In March of 1968 her second oldest son, Steve, joined the Marines and headed off to Viet Nam. At the end of July, Steve's entire company of 65 men was killed. Two years later, her husband Bill lay on the side of the road after a terrible car accident, with severe brain damage and virtually blind. The doctors predicted that he would be a vegetable for the rest of his life. After two years of intense therapy, many prayers, and a lot of laughter, he recovered and went back to work as a mechanical engineer. But then Tim, her oldest son, was killed by a drunk driver when he was traveling with friends back from Alaska. And Barbara herself developed adult-onset diabetes.

Despite the setbacks and despite the incredible losses, Barbara Johnson chose to walk with Christ, and she chose joy. Listen to what she wrote, "Sometimes I meet people who think I'm a little too joyful – that I'm ducking reality and ignoring the painful facts of life. But I simply tell them I'm not ignoring the facts – I'm just looking at them and trying to find joy, not misery. Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional! ...Every day is so precious; we have no time to waste. Some days may bring pain, but we always have a choice between misery and joy. The secret is to live one day at a time and to make the right choices as you go along."

Barbara's words are true. Wherever you find yourself today, choose joy.

Conclusion.

Are you filled with joy this morning? Biblical joy comes from the presence of Jesus Christ, and it's a fruit of the Spirit.

Jesus said that the key to experiencing joy in the Christian life is Him. It involves abiding in Christ. If we are going to be fruitful, if we are going to produce the kind of joyful life for which we have been made, then we need to remain in Christ, be attached to Him, and abide with Him. How will you abide in Jesus today?

Joy isn't an elective in the Christian life. In fact, it's emphatically commanded in Scripture. *"Rejoice in the Lord, always! And again, I say rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4)*. If you're waiting for circumstances to settle down and bring you hope and happiness, you're never going to experience the joy that Jesus talked about. Joy begins today, and it starts with Jesus. Don't postpone joy. It's a fruit of the Spirit you can experience today. Choose Jesus and choose joy. Amen.

¹C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc, 1955), 17,18.