

# JOY, THE CHOICE THAT BEARS FRUIT

Psalm 1

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Between them, they have survived more than fifty years of exile and the soul-crushing violence of oppression. They have each won a Nobel Peace Prize. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is Christian. The Dalai Lama is Buddhist. They are friends. In April of 2015 they spent a week together to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama and to answer, as a gift to humanity, this question, “How do we find joy in the face of life’s inevitable suffering?” Despite their hardships - or, as they would say, because of them - they are two of the most joyful people on the planet. The book about their week-long conversation, The Book of Joy, has inspired this sermon and worship series. Over the next seven weeks, we will be exploring the topic of joy - defining it, thinking about its role in our spiritual lives, looking at scripture passages about joy, considering how to overcome the obstacles to joy, and describing what these two spiritual masters outline as the eight pillars of joy.

I define joy as the feeling of being fully alive, fully present, and grateful. Joy is being completely absorbed in an activity you love, using your talents - time passing quickly. You might be gardening or painting your living room or playing the piano. If you’re immersed in that activity, not distracted, not watching the clock, it’s an experience of joy. Joy is the feeling of being in love. Joy is the gratitude you feel when you look around the table at a holiday dinner and see the faces of the people who mean the most to you. And joy is also the quiet feeling of thankfulness at the beginning of the day. You’re awake, you’re alive, you hear the birds sing as you make your way towards that first cup of coffee, and for it all, you’re thankful for life’s simple pleasures.

A certain song or piece of music can sweep you up in its embrace and transport you to a place of joy.

Is there a difference between joy and happiness? People use the words differently. There is now a science of happiness, some of which I think is quite useful positive psychology. But for this sermon series, I like the distinction that comes from our two spiritual masters. Happiness is often something that depends upon external circumstances. Joy transcends the external circumstances of life. Happiness comes from outside ourselves, while joy comes from within.

The Dalai Lama has been living in exile from his home country of Tibet for six decades. China has occupied his country since 1951. This political situation has been described by some Tibetans as a cultural genocide. Archbishop Tutu grew up as a black in South Africa under the rigidly racist apartheid regime. Both men have every reason to be bitter at the evils they have witnessed. Yet they have chosen a different path, a different attitude. Their own lived experiences, which include suffering and discrimination, have led them to develop a deep empathy for the plight of all people. Rather than dwell on their own difficulties, they have become compassionate and, yes, joyful.

It might seem frivolous to spend seven Sundays talking about joy. It might seem inappropriate, given the crises facing our world. But I propose to you that joy is the only way forward. Joy is the forgotten path.

The John Templeton Foundation supports major research in religion and they have funded a research project on joy at the Yale Divinity School. The project at Yale is aimed at helping people transform joy from an ephemeral state into an enduring trait - from a fleeting feeling into a lasting way of being.

They are finding that the ability to experience joy can be cultivated as a skill, and they have specifically identified these three factors: the ability to reframe our situation more positive-

ly, our ability to experience gratitude, and our choice to be kind and generous. If you want to experience more joy in your life, think about these three factors. You will see, later in this sermon series, how well these three factors tie in with the eight pillars in The Book of Joy.

The first factor is the the way we define our life situation. How do you think about the difficulties in your life? Do you see them as burdens that drag you down, or as exciting challenges that you are motivated to overcome? Do you focus on what you can learn from them, or do you simply complain about them? When I was on vacation last month, I read a beautiful novel, recommended to me by one of our church members. It's called A Gentleman in Moscow. It's a work of fiction set in Russia in the 1920's. An aristocrat returns to Russia from France at the beginning of the Russian revolution to check on his family and his property. He ends up under house arrest in a hotel in Moscow, and that house arrest ends up lasting for decades. At one point in the book he becomes very despondent, as you can imagine. Almost anyone would be. He felt trapped, powerless and hopeless. That moment becomes a turning point in the book and in his life. From that moment on, he chooses a new attitude. He chooses to make the most of his circumstances, and he spends the next thirty years living a very rich and full life, even though he does not step out of the physical boundaries of the hotel. He becomes focused on other people, on how he can use his mind and his talents. The external situation does not confine him nor define him. His life becomes expansive because he has chosen that it be so.

We all live with some sort of limitations. Maybe a physical disability that changes our expectations of what we thought our lives would be. Maybe a change in our finances. Maybe an obligation to care for a family member. There are external factors over which we have no control, yet we can always control the way we think about them. There are always choices about what we will focus on how we will choose to cope.

The second factor that leads to joy is our ability to practice gratitude. In their conversation, the Dalai Lama says, "Every day, think as you wake up, 'I am fortunate to be alive. I have

a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.” Archbishop Tutu jumps right in and adds, “You can be helped to look at the world and see a different perspective...Perhaps people will be moved to see that there are very many people in the world today who will not have had the kind of breakfast that you had. Many millions in the world today are hungry. It’s not your fault, but you woke up from a warm bed, you were able to have a shower, you put on clean clothes, and you were in a house that is warm in the winter. Now just think of the many who are refugees who wake up in the morning, and there’s not very much protection for them against the rain that is pelting down. Perhaps there is no warmth or food or even just water. It is to say in a way, you do want to count your blessings.”

It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy and joyful. The Dalai Lama’s ability to be grateful for the opportunities that exist even in exile was a profound shift in perspective, allowing him not only to accept the reality of his circumstances but also to see the opportunity in every experience.

And the third factor that leads to a life of joy is the practice of compassion and generosity. A focus on others and on giving almost certainly moves us towards joy. A man named Anthony Ray Hinton spent thirty years, not in a hotel, but on death row for a crime he did not commit. He was working in a locked factory at the time of the crime that he was being accused of. When he was arrested in the state of Alabama, he was told that he would be going to jail because he was black. He spent thirty years in a five-by-seven-foot cell in solitary confinement, allowed out only one hour a day. He chose to make the most of that one hour each day. During his time on death row, Hinton became a counselor and friend not only to the other inmates, fifty-four of whom were put to death, but to the death row guards, many of whom begged Hinton’s attorney to get him out.

When a unanimous Supreme Court ruling ordered his release, he was finally able to walk free. He was asked by reporters if he was angry, and he replied, “If I’m angry and unforgiv-

ing, they will have taken away the rest of my life.” He survived in and out of prison by cultivating a powerful attitude of kindness and compassion.

As one writer has said, “Whatever life gives to you, you can respond with joy. Joy is the happiness that does not depend on what happens. It is the grateful response to the opportunity that life offers you at this moment.”

The word “joy” appears in the Bible dozens of times.

It is used to describe not a moment, but a way of life, a prevailing attitude that comes, sometimes as a gift, but sometimes as something that is chosen, that needs to be chosen. The word does not actually appear in our scripture for this morning, but the concept is there. Psalm 1 describes two ways of life, two paths. One is the path of happy people and one is the path of wicked people. That is an interesting distinction right there, isn't it? First of all, “wicked” is not a word used much in our vocabulary today. Secondly, the psalmist describes happy and wicked as opposites. What do you think of as the opposite of happy, or the opposite of joy? You might think that sadness is the opposite of joy. But actually, joy and sadness are often experienced together. The opposite of joy is lifelessness. If joy is experiencing life in its fullness, the opposite is the experience of sleepwalking through life. Apathy is the opposite of joy. There are two ways to live, the Psalmist says. You can walk the path of life, the path of joy, or you can walk the path that leads away from life. “Good” and “wicked” are not so much moral categories here; they are descriptions of a quality of life.

God wants us to experience life in all its rich abundance. Psalm 1 says that those who find joy are like trees planted by streams of water, trees that produce leaves and fruit. Think of that image. Trees that are connected to the source of life, the source of all nourishment. What would it mean for a person to be connected to the source of abundant and eternal life, to be fed not only physically but spiritually? What does it look like when a person's life is richly productive? I believe it is a picture of joy.

The path towards this life of joy is very specific, according to the first psalm. There is a map, a blueprint. Here is verse 2: “Their delight — (that is, the delight of happy, joyful people) - is found in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.” In other words, the path to joy begins and ends with God’s word, with scripture. The word “Torah” in Hebrew is the word for the first five books of the Bible. This Psalm is called a “Torah” psalm. It calls us to God’s word to find there the kind of wisdom we need if we want to live joyful, joy-filled lives. We read this psalm three times in three different versions of the Bible in Bible Study on Wednesday morning. In the Message paraphrase, verse 2 reads like this: “[Happy people, joyful people] thrill to God’s word...[they] chew on Scripture day and night.”

Am I telling you, is this scripture telling us, that we need to become like monks, like nuns, like hermits, people who do nothing but read Scripture day and night? Well, what if...you chose a verse, one verse of scripture, and thought about it for a week? You might choose the one on our bulletin cover...“The joy of the Lord is our strength.” Or try the first three verses of Psalm 1. Or this one: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” Let these words sink into your mind, your heart, your bones. Let them be for you a source of spiritual sustenance and encouragement. Let them bring you the joy that comes when we are more aware of God’s presence all around us.

One Old Testament scholar I read this week said that in the days when the Psalms were written, the struggle for daily survival was the predominant factor in people’s lives. It was luxury to have time to meditate, to think, to study. Only the wealthy had such opportunity. In the musical, “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye sings the song, “If I Were a Rich Man,” which includes these thoughts, “If I were rich I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray...and I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day, and that would be the sweetest thing of all.” The wisdom that is found in holy scripture is the wisdom we still need to-

day. Dwelling on it, chewing on it, can lead us to an experience of life that is more purposeful and more joyful.

Happiness can be a self-centered pursuit. When we're striving for happiness, we want that quick boost that can make us feel better immediately, whether we find it by eating or drinking or spending. But that high doesn't last.

Focusing on joy is not selfish in the least. Joyful people are more compassionate people. In fact, I really don't think we can effectively take on the world's problems if we don't start from a place of joy. If we don't find joy in our lives, are we really motivated to make the world a better place for others? Our efforts will bear fruit when our own lives are deeply planted in the soil, in the spiritual ground of our being, when we are aware of God's presence and of all of our reasons for gratitude.