

16 December 2018

Joy
James 1:1-4; Philippians 1:12-21

As we consider Joy on the third Sunday of Advent, we read first from the Book of James. This James is not either of the ones who were Jesus' disciples. This James was from Jesus' own family, another son of Mary, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church after Jesus' death. James begins his letter with a call to be joyful. We read chapter 1, verses 1-4:

*1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

²My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

In other words: "When you face trials, of any sort, be joyful about it, because trials teach you endurance, which is how you grow up." Or, to put it even more simply: "It's good for you; it builds character." Any of you ever hear that one before? Yeah, me too. One of my grandmother's favorite sayings. And, strictly speaking, it's true. We grow and mature by dealing with hardship. That doesn't mean that I was ever grateful to my grandmother for pointing it out, though, and I suspect James managed to irritate his readers, too. Sometimes even things that are true are best kept to yourself. When you're in the middle of hard times, you really don't need someone telling you that it's good for you. But James doesn't just say to *appreciate* the trials that come. He says to be *joyful* about them. Even Grandmother Morris never said anything that silly. What sort of "joy" is it that you can experience while going through hardship?

That's a real question. If we're going to take this text seriously and consider that there may actually be a kind of joy that endures difficult circumstances, we need to ask what sort of joy this is – and recognize what it is not. For instance, this joy is not just "pleasure." We confuse these two all the time. If I say "I really enjoyed that concert," I mean that it gave me pleasure to listen to. Nothing more or less. But James isn't talking about enjoying ourselves; we don't take pleasure in hardships. Whatever this joy that we can have during difficult times may be, it's not that. I'll come back to the distinction between pleasure and joy in a bit.

First, though, there's another distinction. This sort of joy also has to be more than just "having a positive attitude." This is another thing we're good at – not *having* a positive attitude but *telling* people to do so. We like to encourage those in crisis to think positive thoughts and have a good attitude and be optimistic. In fact, this is a particularly American tendency. A hundred and twenty years ago, the American philosopher William James wrote about the American "Religion of Healthy-Mindedness," a semi-magical belief that we could make good things happen by thinking good thoughts. This belief was repackaged in the 20th century and turned into a multimillion-dollar industry by Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*. And it's not all wrong. Thinking positive thoughts really is better for us than thinking negative thoughts. But that doesn't sound like what the Book of James is talking about, does it? "Positive thinking" is what you do *in spite of* hard times, in order to make them go away. But our scripture talks about facing the trials head on and being joyful while experiencing them.

One more distinction: joy is not the same thing as having a sense of humor. Humor is a necessary tool for maintaining perspective during hard times, and it's very important for me. It's

how I choose my books and my friends. At the same time, though, there is nearly always a hard edge to humor. Mark Twain once wrote, “The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow; there is no humor in heaven.” I think Twain is right: humor is a response to something bad or witless that has happened, but it is often bitter rather than joyful. When we laugh as a pompous person gets his comeuppance, that’s humor. When a child laughs and squeals at a field of butterflies, that’s joy.

But that takes us back to our original question. How is that joy possible when going through trials? So let’s look at our second scripture for the day, from Philippians 1. Remember that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison, facing the daily possibility of execution.

We read Philippians 1, verses 12-21:

¹²I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

What does Paul say makes him rejoice, even in prison? Hearing how his imprisonment has given other people courage to proclaim Christ. His joy is found in the spread of the gospel to others. In other words – just drawing the obvious conclusion here – Paul cares more about the gospel and its transforming power in others than he cares about his own comfort, or even his own life. That’s the kind of joy that can survive personal hardship: joy that is located outside of oneself.

This, I think, is the real distinction between pleasure and joy. Pleasure is located *within* ourselves, and joy is located *beyond* ourselves. Now I am emphatically *not* saying that pleasure is bad. It is not. God invented pleasure, and our scriptures from start to finish declare that God made the world to be enjoyed. The first humans were placed in a garden of delights, and passages from the psalms celebrate the pleasures of food and drink. The Song of Solomon celebrates other pleasures. And all pleasures are gifts of God. Heaven is repeatedly described as a banquet. Yes, pleasure is a part of God’s plan. It is not bad. But it is limited, being restricted to our own senses and feelings. As we grow and mature, our perspective is supposed to expand until, in the words of the Torah, repeated by Jesus, we love our neighbors as much as we used to love only ourselves. At that point, we learn to take pleasure in a broader world, and that pleasure beyond our own experience is joy. You could say that pleasure – that good gift of God – is joy with training wheels. We learn how to experience delight first within our own limited world. But then we throw open the doors and learn to experience pleasure in the good of others and in glimpses of God beyond our own experience, and that joy cannot be taken away by personal

discomfort. Paul finds joy in the spread of the gospel, and so when he hears that people are being “emboldened” to preach the gospel by his example, that outweighs all his fear and discomfort.

One side comment: Paul even might take this a bit too far. He even says, “I know that some who are proclaiming the gospel are doing so for selfish motives or with a vindictive purpose to attack me, but who cares? What matters is that the name of Jesus is being proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.” He seems to have the attitude that there’s no such thing as bad publicity. All right, I can honor his feelings here. But he’s wrong. Not his fault, mind you. He was living in the very first generation of the church, so he had no way to imagine television evangelists. But from our perspective, we can see that those who preach the name of Christ for personal gain or in order to advance a private agenda do *way* more damage to Christ than good. But, again, how is Paul supposed to imagine Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s gold plated bathroom fixtures, paid for by the offerings of their flock? He would consider it insane. All he can see is that people are hearing the name of Christ, and that gives him joy. As he puts it, *Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.*

For the last three weeks, I have mused with you about the gifts of God represented by the first three Advent candles: hope, peace, and joy. I’ve approached all three of them in much the same way, by suggesting that we usually use those words in fairly superficial ways, but that our faith calls us to experience them more deeply. Hope, I said, is more than wishing for a specific desired outcome, but is rather depending our creative God, who always has a Plan B. Peace – the peace that passes understanding, as Paul put it – is found in putting aside our own selfish desires and insecurity and focusing on what is beautiful. And today, I talked about the sort of joy that transcends personal difficulty, because it is located in the well-being of others, and of Christ, rather than ourselves. You see the recurring theme? We find true hope, peace, and joy when we look beyond ourselves. There’s a name for that. It’s also the name of next week’s Advent candle: Love. Come join us next week – Music Sunday – as we celebrate the greatest of these.

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A final word: “To me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” said Paul. It’s a little hard to imagine anyone feeling that way, frankly – really being that indifferent to his own life or death. But let me tell you a story. In the 1980s I heard some Iranian Christians speak in a church. Most of you will remember what it was like in Iran in the 80s, under Ayatollah Khomeini. It’s restrictive now. It was worse then. These young Christians told about Iranian Christians meeting in secret, about Christians who suddenly disappeared, about summary executions. Soon, they said, they were going back to Iran to work with the churches they loved. Someone asked, “What will happen to you if they catch you?” The young woman who was taking questions replied, “Well, then I’ll be with the Lord. . . or in prison ministry.” And then she smiled. That smile is what joy looks like.