

Sermon: How Great Our Joy

December 12, 2008 Gaudete Sunday
Sunshine Cathedral, Ft. Lauderdale, Fl.
Rev. Nancy Wilson

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18: ***“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”***

As the light of Advent grows, we light the candle of Joy today, and it burns brightly in all Churches for those who will come near.

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is the oldest writings of the New Testament, and the earliest of Paul’s famous letters. It is a letter of encouragement in the midst of stress, pressures and even persecution. The Church of Jesus Christ was only about twenty years old when he wrote it, half the age of MCC today.

Paul speaks passionately to them with affection, as family. He urges steadfastness, radical hope and vigilance. In subsequent verses to the passage we read, he tells them, and us, not to quench the Spirit, but to hold fast to what is good! I want to say all those things to you today.

Imagine, if just for one day, we could do those things – ***rejoice constantly, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*** (notice, it is not ***for*** all circumstances. . .). Imagine if we could manage it for a week. How would everything, even in one church community, be totally transformed. Rejoice constantly, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. What a mantra for these times!

Paul was exhorting with all his heart to change the **orientation** of this Church of Jesus. He wanted them to be oriented towards JOY.

In many ways, joy is connected to grace, and the grace of God in Christ was everything to Paul. Joy was the **affect**, the sensate, feeling state of grace.

Joy is not happiness. Happiness depends on our circumstances and mood. Joy depends on our openness to God’s amazing grace. Joy cannot be planned, or manufactured. It must be experienced. It is a gift.

Joy contains an element of awe. I am a birdwatcher, and I remember the day the news broke that they had discovered a pair of Ivory Billed Woodpeckers, thought to have been extinct, in the swamps of Louisiana. Hopes have now faded, but recently a deacon from Church of the Trinity approached me with that unmistakable joy in his face and voice telling me that someone from his rural home town believed they had seen an Ivory Billed, what country people call “The Lord God bird.” I have no idea if that could even be true, but the joy and hope and sense of awe among us birders was contagious!

Holly Bridges Elliott, in describes joy this way:

“It happened to me. . . one noontime as I stood in the kitchen and watched my children eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We were having a most unremarkable time on a nondescript day . . . I hadn’t censed the table, sprinkled the place mats with holy water, or uttered a sanctifying prayer over the Wonder bread. I wasn’t feeling particularly “spiritual.” But, heeding I don’t know what prompting, I stopped abruptly in mid-bustle. . . and looked around me as if I were opening my eyes for the first time that day. The entire room became luminous and so alive with movement that everything seemed suspended – yet pulsating – for an instant, like light waves. Intense joy swelled inside me, and my immediate response was gratitude – gratitude for everything, everything in that space. The shelter of the room became a warm embrace; water flowing the tap seemed a tremendous miracle; and my children became, for a moment, not my progeny or my charges or my tasks, but eternal beings of infinite singularity and complexity whom I would one day, in an age to come, apprehend in their splendid fullness.”

Haven’t you ever had an experience like that at communion in MCC? Where the ordinary gets transformed, barriers and defenses break down, and we are all precious children of God streaming forward for a taste of joy?

I saw the movie “Milk” this week, and was so touched by the scenes of joy and victory in those early days of the gay rights movement, even though you know tragedy and loss is also coming, the joy is palpable.

One of my favorite stories of the surprise of joy, is the first MCC San Francisco service. MCC was only a year old, and the story goes that a group of MCCers went to San Francisco, and met with some friends there. They rented California Hall, and took out an ad in a newspaper. At 11:00 that

Sunday, the group of about 7 or 8 people waited, and no one showed. They knelt around the table that they had prepared as an altar, and prayed and prayed, poured out their hearts and disappointment, asking, imploring God to show them what to do next. When they were finally done, they stood and looked up, and there was a *crowd of people* watching them, silently! Then those who had been praying just erupted in joy, and the first service began.

Joy is also transformation. It does not ignore pain or sorrow. It is not naïve or superficial. Joy takes all into account, and embraces a larger, transcendent experience that, like Julian of Norwich, knows that “all is well, all is well, all manner of things are well.”

In Jamaica, today, circumstances on the ground, in terms of human rights, have not changed all that much from three years ago, when MCC and Sunshine Cathedral began a journey with our community. Yet, to be in their presence today, to worship with them is to know JOY – the joy of belonging, of a passionate message of inclusion and hope. The joy of the knowledge that justice will come, that human rights will come, that God is with them.

Joy is the discipline of continuing to see God at work, to see victories, even in the midst of enormous challenges. Pastor Kevin Downer, founder of **achurch4me** in Chicago, one of our newest MCC church plants, bubbles over with Joy this season, as he writes to me this week, saying:

“Our theme this Advent is “Come with Joy” – despite the (economic) downturn, foreclosures, gang violence, all of which have touched someone in our church directly, I am seeing joy. . .

“It occurred to me recently that the way to Christmas is through Bethlehem – the lowly place of shepherds and servants not worthy or wealthy or clean enough to reside in the nearby Temple of Jerusalem. Bethlehem where Rachel is buried, where Ruth and Naomi covenanted to journey together despite convention and their dire circumstances; Bethlehem where Samuel is sent to find God’s anointed one from among Jesse’s sons. Bethlehem, where God reminds the prophet that God looks beyond the superficial things and chooses the forgotten one.

“Which Way to Christmas?” we ask? Through Bethlehem, the city of humble reality. Through Bethlehem, those deep valley experiences, where commitments are made to journey onward despite the odds or convention or

ridicule; our Bethlehem, through times of uncertain choices, right here in the midst of the profoundly mundane sloppiness and stinking dung heap of our messy earthly existence – foreclosures, bankruptcies, addictions, disease, characteristics that make us feel less than. . .this is where Christmas is found, where Christ is born and God’s promise of Love is fulfilled, for Rachel, Ruth and Naomi, Jesse, Samuel, David. For unconventional families, for unwed pregnant mothers, nameless immigrants, forgotten servants, unclean shepherds, and yes, for us. . .”

Bethlehem, where Jesus was born on the outskirts, on the margins. Where angels sang for joy.

I had lunch with Rev Tania Guzman, who pastors another new MCC in the Dominican Republic – and saw the joy on her face as she described the spiritual growth of that congregation of young people, who in three years have gone from being totally in the closet to speaking up on the floor of the parliament demanding equal rights for the disabled, the elderly and lgbt people! She went from joy to glee as she anticipated their project next year, which will be to take “Would Jesus Discriminate?” to a country where the conservative Catholic cardinal is a part of the government itself. Joy thrives in the midst of great challenges.

I spoke with my long time friend Rev. Judy Dahl this week in South Africa. Judy volunteered her time and at her own expense went there for two month, at the request of the Regional Elder, Rev. Shepherd, to help out in some challenging times. I listened to Judy bubble over as she described the courage and ministry she observed there. As she described “seeing Jesus” in places of great desperation and struggle. With all the serious challenges, and even heartbreak, there was immense, unmistakable joy.

Finally, in old evangelical, Pentecostal traditions, they told us never to “let the devil steal our joy.” No matter what your theology, I know everyone can relate to that image. There are forces within and outside of us that would threaten to defeat us, to discourage us, to undermine our orientation to JOY. Everyone who has ever tried to change an unjust law, build a community in the midst of oppression, preach good news to broken-hearted, has experienced this. Jesus knew this, and lived this. What attracted people to him was that spark of divine, liberating joy in the midst of terrible oppression.

I remember a preacher saying, that when she asked a church member, “how are you doing?” the person replied, “Well, pretty good, under the circumstances.” “What are you doing under there?” said the preacher!

The best antidote to any attempt to steal our joy is, truly, to the very best of our ability, with vigilance, *to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances.* Our circumstances cannot define us, if we are open to JOY.

Joy is an *orientation* – to life, to ministry, it is a response to God’s grace and power at work within us. May joy be yours this season – whatever your circumstances, whatever your need or your desire to give. May joy be deep and wide in this place, in every MCC church, in every home and heart today. Amen.