

“Joy”

John 15 :1-5 & 9-17

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice, and open our minds to your wisdom so that our hearts will be filled with joy. Amen.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins, “What is the chief end of humanity? Humanity's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever.” Are you actively striving to enjoy God? Celebration, cultivating joy, enjoying God is one of the top spiritual practices.

For most, being joyful takes intentional discipline. Jesus explained spiritual practices are like caring for a grape vine. God helps us prune our joy diminishers and nourish our joy enhancers.

My instinct is to be like Eeyore from Winnie-the-Pooh. I gravitate to negative news stories, so I intentionally read good news. I strive to share predominantly good news. After most conversations, I lament how I should have been a better communicator, more affirming, more listening, more questions, less statements, less argumentative, more positive non-verbal communication. I strive to learn from each conversation, let the negative go, and be a better communicator in the future. This is a tough one for me. I have endured many sleepless nights replaying a conversation and beating myself up over it. Sometimes a tough conversation will put me in a reflective funk for days. Exercise helps me process, let go, and move forward. Often, I am in conqueror mode. Obsessed with completing my work, completing the project, completing the laundry, having the house clean. It is hard for me to relax, rest, or even think about other things when there is something I believe I need to complete. In order to let this go, I go out into nature where God communicates with me until I see beauty, relax, and enjoy God through creation. Regularly my prayer has me hiking with Jesus. I am carrying all kinds of baggage and to dos. In my prayer, Jesus takes most of this baggage from me then we sit around a fire beside a mountain lake. I strive to enjoy the unforced rhythms of grace. Too often I force myself to do things instead of going with the flow. Too often I get my sense of worth from what I do instead of who I am, a beloved child of God. I am a rule follower, goal achiever, organized, and a person of routine. I get frustrated and grumpy when I am unable to accomplish things correctly and on time. I strive to savor grace. A good friend asked me after we served together on workcamp in 2002 why I was driven to plan every minute. My family will tell you that on our trips I create a binder with every reservation, and details on a variety of options for each day. I am striving to be more spontaneous. I have always enjoyed and learned from the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. I am like Cameron. I am striving to grow my Ferris side for “life moves pretty fast. If you do not stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” Or in the words of the Westminster Confession, “enjoy God”. I get stuck in negative thought patterns. I strive to start every day with a prayer of gratitude for five things or people. When negative thoughts come, I acknowledge them, strive to place them aside and think a positive thought. I am a list maker. I struggle to enjoy God until my list is complete. Adding “Joy” to most of the emails I send helps me put my list in prospective. I get discouraged when things do not go as others and myself want them to go. I remind myself that God is redeeming the cosmos. God will redeem all regardless of how well I partner with God. I show love through acts of service. I strive to remember that people appreciate other love languages. My tendency is to let my schedule control me. I strive to make time for retreats, adventures, regular sleep, exercise, and healthy eating. I strive to grieve my losses, to give thanks for the time I had and be grateful for who and what I have. My tendency is to dwell on negative comments for days and let them crush me. I strive to learn from them and let them go. I have positive files where I have saved the positive comments people have shared with me. Sometimes it takes several positive comments to chase away a single negative comment. I worry. Worry that my words may not reflect God's desire for us, worry that instead of helping someone I may hurt them, worry that others are not perceiving God's grace through my ministry, worry that the church will not have enough money, volunteers, and resources to glorify God and enjoy God. I strive to recall the wonderful things God has done in the past, dream of what God will do in the future and hand it all over to God. My quest for joy is sometimes allusive, because I think I must accomplish all of this and more to be joyful. Too often I think when this happens, then I will celebrate. At these times I enjoy a simple delight, biking, popcorn, 80s music, a movie, time with Leslie.

John 15 :1-5 & 9-17 NRSV Jesus said. “I am the true vine, and God is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am

the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask God in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

To be joyful one needs to allow God to prune out your joy robbing tendencies. To be joyful one needs to allow God to nourish your joys. What joy robbers will you strive to let God prune? What joys will you let God nourish?

Joy is a spiritual practice. An athlete practices to excel at their sport. A musician practices to create pleasing music. As a human we practice being joyful. What are the key exercises to your joyful practice? The Westminster Catechism believes that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Often practice is enhanced by practicing with a friend, coach, expert, and mentor. Jesus is our friend, coach, expert, and mentor. Jesus promises to always be with us, to tenderly, lovingly, graciously expanding our joy. Jesus came to fill us with God's joy and make our joy complete. Friends share. Jesus shares with us God's grace, blessings, love, and joy. Jesus shares how God is redeeming, healing, saving, purifying everyone. Jesus shares how God is wiping away every tear. Jesus shares how we are becoming fully alive. A fully alive person glorifies God and enjoys God.

Jesus' desire for the church is that all of us are friends. Friendships flourish where there is safe space to share, be honest and be vulnerable, like I did at the beginning of this message. Friendships flourish when we challenge, comfort, support and encouraging one another. Friendships flourish when we practice being loving and joyful together and celebrate together.

How are we doing as a community of joyful friends? Are we sharing with each other? Are we enjoying God together? Throughout today's scripture Jesus kept using the word abide. Abide in God. Abide in love. Jesus abides in us. When we abide in God and abide in love, we bear fruit and are filled with joy.

Jesus declares: "I choose you," "You are my friend," "Your joy will be complete."

Celebration brings joy into our life. Joy makes us resilient. Richard Foster wrote, "Freedom from anxiety and care forms the basis for celebration. Because we know God cares for us, we can cast all our care upon God. God will turn our mourning into dancing. Joy is the motor that keeps everything else going. Joy produces energy. God brings joy by redeeming and sanctifying the ordinary. If we fill our lives with simple good things and constantly thank God for them, we will be joyful and the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships." C. S. Lewis says, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." Lewis Smedes wrote, "To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence." John Ortberg wrote, "The Bible puts joy in the nonoptional category. Joy is a command. Joylessness is a serious sin, one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church." Karl Barth said, "Joy is a defiant nevertheless." Joy is a full stop against sadness, bitterness, and resentment. Our joy is so important to God that Jesus took on human flesh to bring us the joy of heaven and the joy of God. Jesus came as the Joy-bringer.

Homiletics online states, "The greatest decision facing the 21st Century church is whether we will function as a law-based community of faith or as a grace-based community of love and joy. Will we be defined by some carefully articulated, theologically sophisticated, logically delineated "Articles of faith?" Or will we, the church, welcome our role as a living, breathing, healing, helping, community known for our "Acts of joyful love"?

We are called to partner with God in pruning our personal joy diminishers and nurturing our joy enhancers. We are called to be friends, to practice being loving and joyful together. We are called to celebrate, rejoice, and enjoy God forever. Amen