

Resolution: Embrace Joy

Scripture: Psalm 100; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

Have you ever heard of Suzanne Falter-Barns? Neither have I, but according to her website, she is the author of two self-help books, How Much Joy Can You Stand and Living Your Joy: A Practical Guide to Happiness. The website states that she has been “inspiring more than 723,587 people to live their joy since 1999.” Wow! 723,587 people! I have no idea how anyone arrived at that number, but it sure is a lot. And, the website says that you and I can learn how to start inspiring people, too, by becoming “Joy Facilitators.” All we have to do is pay \$977, and we will receive “two 200-page binders” and 4 CDs so that we can “start hosting workshops, retreats, and teleclasses” right away. Do I sound skeptical? Yes, I am very skeptical. But, Ms. Falter-Barns does pose some interesting questions on her website. She asks:

- Are you spending your life the way you are meant to?
- Do you move through life excited and exhilarated because you are using the gifts you were given at birth?
- Did you know that you have a unique purpose in life, and that you won’t be truly happy until you find it — and live it?

We have come to the final week in our series on “Resolutions.” Week one, we heard the good news that God offers you and me the opportunity to begin our lives anew. We can have a clean slate every day, because for all time and for all people God through Christ has granted us pardon and mercy. Week two, we heard God’s plea for you and me to consciously, actively, eagerly respond “Yes!” to his offer of new life — for us to choose to accept God’s love and follow the ways of Christ. We also recognized that the choice to say “Yes” to God does not confront us only once, but every day we remain on this earth. Throughout every day, you and I must decide whether our next action will be according to the will of God — or according to our own will or the will of the people around us. For week three, we considered what it means to “get real” about accepting God’s love and following his will — asking ourselves whether we really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and really express that belief by practical acts of love toward all of our neighbors. Today, we want to talk about embracing joy — about what it means to have true joy in our lives, true joy in our living.

Our Bible begins with joy. Scholars tell us that the very oldest portion of the Bible is in the Book of Exodus, in a passage known as the Song of Moses and one called the Song of Miriam. In the first of these, Moses leads his fellow Israelites in a song to thank God for delivering them out of slavery in Egypt. They rejoice that, “The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.”ⁱ When they were done, “the prophet Miriam ... took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously....’”ⁱⁱ Our Bible not only begins with joy, but also is filled with joy. For example, two weeks ago we heard this promise that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” The earth bursting into song, the very trees clapping their hands — what could possibly be the source of all that joy?

One place Scripture answers that question is in our Second Lesson for this morning. It is from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, an area in what now is central Turkey. Paul began this letter not with joy, but with a slam. He told the Galatians, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ “Pervert the gospel of Christ” — Paul used that very tough language to introduce an all-too-common problem in any church, ancient or modern: the problem of people who want to turn the church into a system of rules and laws and judgment. Paul had a favorite word for that kind of thinking: slavery. When we enforce anything other than the love of God, Paul declared, we are enforcing slavery. As we read our Second Lesson, listen for how Paul developed this idea, how he distinguished between the slavery the world promotes and the freedom God offers.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the

whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

“You say you are a Christian. Then where the devil is your joy?” That question was posed by the French novelist Georges Bernanos. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once told a group of Roman Catholic nuns, “If you have joy in your hearts, would you please inform you faces.”^{iv} Both the Christian Georges Bernanos and the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche recognized the same contradiction: the contradiction of people who declare faith in Christ while projecting an air of gloom and despair. One group that has been blamed for this is our spiritual forbears, the men and women of the Protestant Reformation and the Pilgrims and Puritans who first came to this country. But, those are the same folks who wrote and taught the Westminster catechisms, which begin: “What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Glorification. Enjoyment. That is our spiritual heritage.

Our spiritual heritage does include a caution against confusing joy with pleasure, with the kind of self-indulgent catering to our emotions we hear Paul describe as gratifying “the desires of the flesh.” Sometimes we let the pendulum swing too far in that direction, and we find that instead of worshiping God, we have begun to worship our personal desire to feel good. We no longer look to the church as a body of people with whom we can serve and worship God, but as a place we go for a “good worship experience,” to get an emotional high to carry us through the coming week. Following Christ is about far more than shouting and clapping and having our individual needs fulfilled — but following Christ *is* about joy. To know Christ is to believe and incorporate into our hearts the words Jesus spoke to his disciples the night before his crucifixion: “My Father is glorified by this: that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”^v

C. S. Lewis, who wrote The Chronicles of Narnia, wrote an autobiography he titled Surprised by Joy. In it, Lewis described how his growth in the Christian faith involved learning about joy.^{vi} One of the things he learned about joy is that it is different from happiness, excitement, pleasure, or fun. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with being happy, feeling excited, or having pleasure or fun. The God who created us provides us abundant opportunities for pleasure and has invited us to have fun. In Ecclesiastes we read that there is “nothing better for [people] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live” and that “it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”^{vii} God has given you and me the ability to feel good. The problem comes when we pervert that ability into our life goal. When we turn the gift of knowing pleasure into a fulltime pursuit of feeling pleasure and happiness and fun. When we do that, we have made pleasure our god — a god who is certain to disappoint.

Another thing C. S. Lewis learned about joy is that joy can coexist with pain. Most of us have known the agonizing pain that comes with the death of someone we dearly love. Many of us also have found that at the same time we felt that pain, we also felt an overwhelming joy in the person’s life, in the memories that kept bubbling up in the midst of our grief. I have had the privilege of being with church members following the death of a loved one. As friends and family members have gathered and reminisced, I have watched their laughter mingle with their tears. I have watched the joy of life carry them through the pain of death. I have been with others while they have faced a tragedy or endured a personal trial. At those times, I have watched God’s gift of joy become an anchor holding them safe amid the storms and blows they needed to withstand.^{viii} I have heard people testifying to the truth of Psalm 30 that “[w]eeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”^{ix}

A third thing C. S. Lewis learned about joy is that joy tends to be a surprise. Joy is not a thing that you and I can pursue — joy is the love of God pursuing us. God’s urgent plea is that you and I will let him catch us up in his joy and his love. That is the literal meaning of the word “repent” — that you and I will turn around and walk toward God, instead of heading off on our own. Human logic tells us that going our own way is best, that you and I are the only ones who know what will fulfill our desires and meet our needs. We hear that view expressed when a person says, “Sure, I will give my life to God when I am ready to die, but for now I want to enjoy life. I want to be free.”

Enjoy life. Be free. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”^x God did not create you and me in order to enslave us. God did not send his son into the world in order to condemn us.^{xi} God created us for life. God created us in his image^{xii} and has crowned us with glory and honor.^{xiii} And, for the living of each day, God offers us his Spirit. With the help of the Holy Spirit, you and I can know a freedom that goes beyond anything the world has to give. You and I can have the fruits of “love, joy, [and] peace” within us — forever. The world cannot give these gifts to us, and so the world cannot take them away. That is Jesus’ promise, made during his final meal with his disciples, when he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”^{xiv}

Remember Pollyanna? I think Pollyanna gets a bad rap. Pollyanna was a young orphan sent to live with her aunt, who was described as “a stern, severe-faced woman ... who never thought to smile.”^{xv} Pollyanna’s father had been the pastor of a small, missionary church, and he once told Pollyanna that “he wouldn’t stay a minister for a minute if ‘twasn’t for the rejoicing texts.” The “rejoicing texts,” he said, were all those passages of scripture “that begin ‘Be glad in the Lord,’ or ‘Rejoice greatly,’ or ‘Shout for joy.’”^{xvi} Pollyanna’s father had counted those passages and found hundreds.^{xvii} People have come to use the name Pollyanna as meaning an over-optimistic fool, someone who denies the tragedies and pain of life by putting on a fake smile. That also is what many believe about those of us who heed the words of the apostle Paul, who called us to “[r]ejoice in the Lord always.”^{xviii} But, it is within that call — the call for us to rejoice *in the Lord* — that we find the answer to the questions we heard earlier from Ms. Falter-Barns, the so-called “Joy Facilitator.” With a little rephrasing — and a major refocusing — her questions become vital inquiries for each one of us:

- Are you and I spending our lives the way God intends us to?
- Are we moving through life excited and exhilarated because we are using the gifts that God has given us?
- Are we confident that God has a purpose for us, and that in striving to fulfill that purpose we will know joy?

Despite what the “Joy Facilitators,” self-help gurus, and pop psychologists might try to sell us on, joy is not a self-help project — joy is a Spirit-help project. Joy is not a thing that you and I can pursue — joy is the love of God pursuing us. And the good news of the Gospel is this: God is ready to catch us up in his love and let us know true joy in our lives, true joy in our living. *Amen.*

ⁱ Exodus 15:2

ⁱⁱ Exodus 15:20-21

ⁱⁱⁱ Galatians 1:6-7

^{iv} Another time Nietzsche said, “If Christians want me to believe in their redeemer, they need to look more redeemed.”

^v John 15:8-11

^{vi} As discussed by Doris Donnelly in *Joy: The Delight of Longing*, The Living Pulpit Oct./Dec. 1996, p 6

^{vii} Ecclesiastes 3:11-15

^{viii} The anchor image is drawn from a reflection for the Third Sunday in Advent, 2005, author unknown.

^{ix} Psalm 30:5

^x John 10:10

^{xi} John 3:17

^{xii} Genesis 1:27

^{xiii} Psalm 8:5

^{xiv} John 14:27

^{xv} Eleanor H. Porter, Pollyanna, Chapter 1: *Miss Polly*

^{xvi} Porter, Pollyanna, Chapter 22: *Sermons and Woodboxes*

^{xvii} According to Pollyanna, her father had found 800 “rejoicing texts.” Porter, Pollyanna, Chapter 22: *Sermons and Woodboxes*

^{xviii} Philippians 4:4