

December 13 - 3rd Sunday of Advent - Reflection

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

This Joy That I Have

During this pandemic one of the saddest comments I regularly hear is a version of ‘I have lost my joy’. The loss of that spark we call joy is something that has been a common product of the changes we have all faced over the past few months. We mourn its loss and look for ways to recapture it and on this 3rd Sunday of Advent we are encouraged to think about the topic of “Joy” as the pink “Joy” candle joins the “Peace” and “Hope” candles on our Advent wreath. The Bible actually has a great deal to say about the topic with 27 of the 150 psalms containing the word joy or joyful and approximately 200 verses of the Bible containing those words. Among the more well known verses is one from John’s Gospel - “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. The Psalm appointed for today announces that “those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. It would seem, then, that God wishes us to have joy and that much joy exists in the place where God resides. Remember that when Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep he said, ‘there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent’ (Luke 15:7). Joy is meant to be ours so when we lose our joy there must be a way to get it back.

One of the songs that has been provided by our Sunday School Curriculum has the following words. “This joy that I have, the world didn’t give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn’t give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn’t give it to me. The world didn’t give it, the world can’t take it away.” The truth of this little children’s song seems to have been overtaken by the events of having our lives affected by the Covid-19 virus but it is truth all the same. Joy does not really come from circumstances it comes from God and our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In the 15th chapter of John’s Gospel we learn something very important about joy and our connection with God. Using the illustration of a vineyard Jesus told his disciples that: “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.” (John 15:5) and then later in the same speech, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy will be complete.” (John 15:10-11) Joy has been planted in our hearts along with the love of God and from there it grows or doesn’t grow. If God has given us this joy what can we do if we lose sight of it?

In St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians he writes “but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control” (Galatians 5:22-3) What I

gather from this verse, and others, is that joy is a product of our relationship with Jesus Christ and not something that depends on our circumstances. To be sure a positive circumstance helps our feelings of joy but the absence of a positive circumstance does not eliminate the possibility of joy. As we contemplate this topic let us look again at some of the passages of scripture assigned for this coming Sunday.

The psalm appointed ends with the words ‘those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.’ (Psalm 126:5,6) It seems that while it is acknowledged that sadness does exist in our lives that joy will come. Joy is indeed like fruit that grows because of the connection with the vine. As mentioned above, Jesus once said to his disciples, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5) Joy comes because it is the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit which makes it very important for us to maintain our connection with God.

In his first letter to the Christian in Thessalonica St. Paul urges them to “Rejoice always”. He then points his readers to their source - the God of peace - and assures them that the source of their joy, love, peace patience... is the God who raised Jesus the Messiah from the dead. The Messiah is the one to whom Isaiah refers in the passage from the 61st chapter of Isaiah. This, you may recall, is the portion of the scroll of Isaiah which Jesus read in Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus is the one who was anointed to: “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour,...” Jesus is the one who said, “I am the vine, you are the branches” and Jesus is the one who brings about our ability to experience joy. There is, you see, a common thread to the topic of Joy and it is that joy is a result of our connection with God and not necessarily a product of what is going on around us. So does that mean we can ignore our circumstances and just ‘put on a happy face?’ I don’t think so but I also don’t think we need to face the troubles of this life with the thought that our chance for joy is at an end.

Joy, like Peace and Hope, are planted in our lives through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us the way a seed is planted in a garden. The seed grows under the ground where it cannot be seen but evidence of its growth does come at some point. As followers of Jesus Christ we have been grafted into the vine and given the gift of joy but the evidence of its growth may be waiting to be shown to us. Recently I was watching a group of people when a very serious looking man changed his expression at the sight of what must have been his granddaughter. The granddaughter didn’t create the joy but her presence awakened it in him. It was their relationship that allowed the fruit of joy to come bubbling up to the surface of the man’s life. It was always there it just needed some stimulation. I think this event

describes our circumstance very well. If we have a relationship with God the joy of the Lord is there but it might need some stimulation to be seen. So be joyful in the midst of this pandemic because the joy of the Lord is in you and that joy is your strength. Focus your attention on your relationship with Jesus Christ and sing your praises to God - you may find Joy bubbling up. Give thanks to the Lord for your blessings and you will find Joy appear as a bonus. Take heart, brothers and sisters, God wishes you to experience joy. If you are finding it difficult to experience joy you may need a bit more stimulation so call a friend, stay connected with your loved ones, look at pictures of joyous events and give thanks and don't be afraid to laugh out loud. We have a great helper in this journey in the Holy Spirit but we also have helpers all around us. In this time of pandemic we may need to work a little harder to stay connected with our family and friends but the effort will be rewarded as the stimulation for joy will come more readily.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said it this way. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2)

"This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it, the world can't take it away".