



September 18, 2022

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

John 15:7-11

Fruit of the Spirit: Antidote for the Modern World: Joy!



Today we enter into the second Sunday of exploring a path to healing the ills not only of our lives but of our city, our country and our world. It comes through exuding the Fruit of the Spirit. This fruit is the result of dwelling in the heart of God through faithfulness and it will take nothing less to combat the despair that has infected our world.

There are many reasons to despair. The cost of COVID which has not only claimed a million lives but devastated the mental health of millions more, especially in our youth. The polar divide across economics, class, and race. Inflation, which has leveraged many families to the breaking point. With an uncertain future millions of young adults are struggling to chart a future.

But to look at our context and then turn the clock back to New Testament times. There were many more reasons for despair in those days. The rule of law was nonexistent. Despite our rocky transfer of power in our last Presidential election, in Roman times transfer of power took place through murder. Medical care made one worse rather than better, nutrition was horrid, famine was the order of the day, and life expectancy was terrible. To make matters worse, being a follower of Jesus was a supreme social risk and the consequences could mean not only poverty and scorn but death.

And yet, and yet despite all of this, the charge from Paul in Philippians is to, *“Rejoice always, again I say rejoice.”* The words from our Lord in John’s gospel this morning tells us that despair does not derive from factors outside of our control no matter the context. In fact, our joy can be perfect and complete by following only one rule: abide in Jesus’ love, obeying His commands.

Jesus combats this despair with the true, eternal power. Despair is a result of failing to see the power of God in the past, the present, and the future. To abide in Christ is to come to know His ways, which is to come to trust that history is in His hands.

We begin finding joy through self-discovery. Over 2,000 years ago as an Israelite looked into the heavens, he was suddenly struck with a notion, and it led him to write the 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm. In the midst of the glorious, mesmerizing and astounding heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars; the same God who made those made us! And did so in a frighteningly incredible way; with an artist’s care and creativity.

Whatever our circumstances, God has supremely blessed each of us in giving us life, a mind, and a world in which to live. When we live out who we are God experiences raw delight.

*“I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.”* This quote is from Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner whose story was made famous in the academy award winning movie *Chariots of Fire*.

For those of you not here this summer, you missed something. Something as incredible as Eric Liddell’s world-class speed. You know how amazing this choir is. But what you don’t all know is just how outstanding these voices are as soloists. Several times over the last months we got to hear these solos. One Sunday we heard a solo of a favorite hymn to a unique arrangement. By the end I felt as if God drove a pile driver of love straight into my heart. The voice was so pure, so powerful, so

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connected to the words. I know God was smiling and everyone in this sanctuary felt that joy.

But we don't need these exceptional gifts to make God smile. God delights in your crunching numbers, baking a meal, closing a business deal, singing a song, just being you, in the best way you can.

Nothing brings a parent more joy than to see their child thrive and our heavenly father, our heavenly parent is no different. And God's delight...it is infectious. The is what Eric Liddell was talking about... "when I run *I feel* His pleasure."

Next, we find joy by coming together as the people of God. Nehemiah wrote during a time when the people of God had returned from decades of deep depression. It was a result of their wickedness in their treatment of the poor, worshipping other Gods, and the enemies who defeated them. By the water of Babylon, they wept and wept and wept. But then God brought them through and brought them home.

Rather than a solemn return he wrote this, *"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."* Nehemiah 8:10

We have been through a lot in these past years. COVID, racial reckonings, economic uncertainty, and vast transitions. But we have learned to deal with COVID. And so, just as with Nehemiah, we are back together as the people of God! Singing joyful songs of praise, listening to the sublime choir, returning from summer, seeing one another again. I have heard time and again from you all what this Homecoming Sunday means and now I know what you mean! It is an incredible feeling, filled with such love for each other in the name of God.

And we have so much joy in store for you this fall. The Festival of Hymnody, The Kirkin' of the Tartans, World Communion Sunday and so much more! The worship here feeds us, energizes us, inspires us! But we have something more, something new for Brick in answer to your request for more time together.

Wednesday night suppers, called, *The Faithful Table*, will begin in a few weeks. And no, we won't be serving hot dogs, lime Jell-O and potato salad. It will be an expertly catered meal with a table set for royalty. That is you; as I Peter tells us, "*the royal priesthood*" of the people of God. This feast will seek to evoke God's heavenly banquet our eternal joy.

On that day to come, when people from every walk of life will sit at one table, hosted by the Lord of Hosts, Christ at the center. In our banquet Hall we will have children, and nonagenarians, school families and people from the community. We will conclude with a time of praise with special music, prayers from our children, and familiar favorite hymns.

We will try to live into the admonition of Ecclesiastes, *"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do."* Ecclesiastes 9:7

But for this joy to be lasting it must not remain with us. True joy comes through giving it away. So, Paul wrote, *"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* 2 Corinthians 9:7. It is because of this truth that a diabetic chef I knew experienced extreme delight when she saw my eyes light up every time she baked a lemon Bundt cake with frosting poured into the middle, filled to overflowing!

It is through giving ourselves away that we most deeply abide in Christ's love as He

commanded. And here that we encounter the great paradox of our faith. In the moment of Jesus' deepest pain on the cross He found the path to bringing the world joy. The great Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, wrote, "*Joy can only be real if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.*"

As Christians we can heal the world and bring joy from despair through this life of service. There is an amazing organization that our congregation supports, *Search and Care*. No matter if you are rich or poor as you head down the stretch of your length of days, the wish is the same: to remain in your home living as much life as you possibly can. They are devoted to this mission and the stories are incredible. But to get to the joy of this work means being willing to make yourself vulnerable and available to the pain and isolation of others.

We have heard the tragedy of COVID too many times. A couple separated by the disease and takes the life of one leaving the other utterly alone, driving the remaining spouse to a nursing home in lockdown with no human contact.

But *Search and Care* offered one couple the ability to stay together as long as possible, because they brought medicines and more. When the wife died, they did even more to keep the husband in the home by bringing groceries, offering friendship. And instead of so many funerals that never took place, they arranged masks and sanitizer so that everyone could come together for the funeral.

The letters of joy from family members and recipients are unmatched in the thanks they give to God and to this ministry. This is why Paul went to the lengths he did and wrote, "*Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*" 2 Corinthians 6:10.

Possessing the love of God is something that no earthly force can destroy or dismantle.

Abiding in Christ means running the race all the way to end and running it not only for ourselves but for others. And the power of joy is the power of God to overcome all things.

As Mother Teresa wrote, "*Joy is prayer. Joy is strength. Joy is love. Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.*" Amen.