

Advent Series / Joy (Bible Reading: Luke 1:26-56)

Intro

The overriding tone of our Bible reading from Luke 1 is joy. The very first word of the divine message that the angel Gabriel brings to Mary is “Greetings” – the Greek word meaning “rejoice”. Then Elizabeth “gave a glad cry” when she saw Mary. John the Baptist, who was in Elizabeth’s womb “jumped for joy” at the sound of Mary’s voice. And in what is commonly called the Magnificat, the story concludes with Mary’s joyful song of praise.

Our Advent theme is called ‘Making Room’ and today we are going to talk about creating space in our lives for joy.

We all have an innate desire to experience joy and happiness. Pascal picks up on the shared longing of humanity when he writes, “Man wishes to be happy and only to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so.”

What is joy? Joy is a sense of well being characterized by positive emotions ranging from quiet contentment through to ecstasy.

There is a spectrum of joy.

Illustration: Watering the garden – a quiet happiness.

Gary and I in St. Ives. Peter the apostle, talks about a “joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

Happiness Research

Happiness is a major focus of scientific research. A summary of the findings concerning happiness indicates:

1. We control about half of our happiness level.

Genetics and environment account for about 50% of the joy in life we experience. This means that although half of our joy predisposition is pre-set, we have the capacity to raise our level joy.

2. Money doesn't buy happiness. Once we get to a certain level of income that is enough to pay our bills and keep us in the lifestyle we've grown accustomed to, more money doesn't result in more happiness. The only two exceptions to this rule is if you give money away, or if it significantly improves your social rank. People who give money away appear to sustain greater levels of happiness over time than those who don't.

3. Relationships are a key factor in our happiness level. The stronger our social connections, the happier we are likely to be. This is the most reliable indicator of joy.

4. Events are more important than things. Individuals and families who spend their time and money doing things together, such as, having a picnic or going on holiday are happier than those who buy a bigger house or a better car.

5. Valuing simple pleasures increases our happiness level. Learning to savour the small things in life such as food and bathing makes us happier.

6. Finding meaning and purpose increases our happiness level.

7. Realizing tangible goals increases our happiness level

8. Being other focused increases our happiness level.

Overall people who are happy tend to live longer and healthier lives.

(Primary references: John M. Grohol, Martin Seligman and Nancy Etcoff)

Christian Joy

For Christians there is a divine dimension to joy. Joy is to be a compelling and consistent quality of the Christian life. It is a joy, which transcends circumstances.

As the ancient world observed the early Christian church, its dynamic communal life and gracious response to persecution, they struggled to define what they witnessed. So the watching world created a new word to describe what they saw – they said the followers of Jesus were “en” “theos”, that is “in” “God”. “En theos” is the source of the word enthusiasm.

Christian’s ought to be joyful because...

1. God is joyful and rejoices over us.

The church’s portrayal of God at times has tragically been one of judgment and anger. The thought of a God with a smile on God’s face for some Christians is an alien concept.

It is in the face of Jesus we best see the smile of God.

Luke 10:21, “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit...”

Zephaniah 3:17, “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Isaiah 65:18-19, “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people...”

God is not only a joyful but God is joyful about us!

2. God institutes times of celebration.

The concept of Jubilee found in Leviticus 25 was God's intention for the social order of Israel. God mandated that Jubilee was to occur every 50 years – it was a time when all debts were cancelled, all land returned to their original owners, all slaves released and all prisoners were to be set free. Jubilee was a metaphor for freedom and celebration.

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus uses the motif of Jubilee to describe his life mission.

Additionally, the tithe (10% of people's income) was to be used for the purpose of celebration.

“Make an offering of ten percent, a tithe, of all the produce which grows in your fields year after year. Bring this into the Presence of God, your God, at the place he designates for worship and there eat the tithe from your grain, wine, and oil and the firstborn from your herds and flocks. In this way you will learn to live in deep reverence before God, your God, as long as you live. But if the place God, your God, designates for worship is too far away and you can't carry your tithe that far, God, your God, will still bless you: exchange your tithe for money and take the money to the place God, your God, has chosen to be

worshiped. Use the money to buy anything you want: cattle, sheep, wine, or beer—anything that looks good to you. You and your family can then feast in the Presence of God, your God, and have a good time.” Deuteronomy 14:22-26

Through tithing, Jubilee and Israel’s other religious festivals, God sought to establish a culture of celebration and joy for the people of God.

If we are responsible for about half of our joy level, what can we do to make room for joy in our lives?

1. Love people

John 15:9-13, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

2. Be thankful

Psychologist and theologian Richard Beck, writes, 'People who stay open to joy... are those who practice gratitude.'

A key to cultivating happiness is simple really – be thankful and grateful!

This week I encourage you to practice gratitude. Be grateful in particular for the incarnation of Jesus, through whom we know that God is essentially good, kind and forgiving.

Conclusion

William Barclay said that "A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces."