



November 22, 2020 – Cultivating Contentment: “Finding Joy”

Scripture:

You have filled my heart with more joy than when their wheat and wine are everywhere! Psalm 4:7

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous. Proverbs 21:15

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. John 15:11-13

His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Matthew 25:23

MONDAY 11.23.30 Psalm 4:6-8, Isaiah 12:2-6

Joy rooted in God

Today’s readings might seem like fairly “standard” songs of praise. They weren’t. We don’t know all the details, but Psalm 4 clearly came from a time when both the psalmist and his nation faced trials and danger. And the prophet Isaiah wrote on the heels of stern warnings of coming judgment (cf. Isaiah 1:10-17). His phrase “on that day” meant his song of praise was a song of hope for a future Isaiah might not (and did not) live to see. Their joy was rooted, not in any earthly, material prosperity, but in the presence of God with God’s people.

- Why “shout and sing for joy”? Isaiah said the reason was “because the holy one of Israel [i.e. God] is great among you.” As the Christmas season approaches, we’re flooded with messages about how the latest smart phone, sophisticated toy or video game, or advanced automobile will bring us joy. How easy or hard do you find it to remember that the source of lasting, ultimate joy is your connection with God?
- Scholar John Goldingay said, “Providing the people with a song that they will be able to sing one day is another way of inviting them to live in hope....they’re virtually praising God for fulfilling his promises before the fulfillment happens. Wherever they are, they’re invited to



see that they have come this far by faith and can continue in hope, not because their faith or hope is big but because the God they trust and hope in is big.” * How do you maintain your trust and hope in our big God at times of disappointment, sadness and loss?

Prayer: Lord God, I find joy relatively easy on sunny days when everything goes my way. Teach me to focus more on you, and less on everything going my way, so that my inner joy is more deeply rooted and durable. Amen.

** John Goldingay, Isaiah for Everyone. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 53.*



TUESDAY 11.24.20 Matthew 13:44-46

Joyously finding the greatest treasure

Not often, but every now and again, something like Jesus' first story would actually happen in his days. A farmer—likely a tenant farmer on someone else's land—would unearth a cache of money that someone had buried in a field and never come back for. Jesus followed that with a picture of finding a flawless pearl whose value would go far beyond even ordinarily valuable pearls. Finding the kingdom of heaven, he said, brought even more joy than finding that kind of material treasure.

- Jesus made a sweeping claim in these stories. “The gospel of the kingdom isn’t a pleasant religious idea that you might like to explore some time when you’ve got an hour or two to spare....It’s like a fabulous hoard of treasure, yours for the taking—if you’ll sell everything else to buy the field where it’s hidden. It’s like the biggest, finest, purest pearl that any jeweler ever imagined, and it’s yours for the taking—if you’ll sell everything else, including all the other pearls you’ve ever owned, in order to purchase it.” * Have you ever had to give up anything you thought was valuable to go “all in” for Jesus' kingdom? If not, what might you need to give up at some point? If so, has it been worth it?

DID YOU KNOW? If you consider Mount Olympus Presbyterian your church home, and you missed the opportunity to turn in your commitment card to Mount Olympus Presbyterian Church, there is still time. Contact Sheila Barnish at sbarnish@mtopres.org for assistance.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you once asked, “What will people give in exchange for their lives?” (Matthew 16:26) Make me willing to give up anything else to receive your gift of eternal life. Amen.

* N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–15*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 177.



WEDNESDAY 11.25.20 Matthew 25:14-23

Sharing the master's joy

The “coins” in this story were really valuable. “The Greek word is *talanton*, often translated as ‘talent,’ which refers to a monetary unit equal to more than 16 years of earnings for a laborer.”

* But Jesus only used the amount of money to set up his real point: two of the servants were faithful, but the third wasn't. He said we are faithful to God as we are willing to use whatever resources of energy, time, skill, money or other assets God gives us to bless others and build God's kingdom.

- The master invited the faithful servants, “Celebrate with me” (literally “enter into the joy of your lord”). But in Jesus' story, that didn't mean a big party. It meant “I'll put you in charge of much.” As scholar William Barclay said, “The reward of work well done is still more work to do. The two servants who had done well are not told to lean back and rest on their oars because they have done well. They are given greater tasks and greater responsibilities in the work of the master.” ** Jesus found joy in his kingdom work. Do you find joy in being able to join in that work?
- Our culture tends to teach us to think, “I earned all this money and these possessions, so I can do anything I want with them.” Jesus' story suggested that God has asked us to care for some of what God truly owns (not us)—cf. also Deuteronomy 8:12-18. How easy or hard do you find it to make the inner shift from “I OWN all this” to “I'm a steward to whom God has entrusted these things to use for God's purposes”? How can faithful stewardship produce joy?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I admit that sometimes I'd like to claim all the resources you entrust to me for myself. Teach me daily more how to find joy in being good and faithful steward. Amen.

** Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 25:15 in The CEB Study Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 54 NT.*

*** William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 2 Chapters 11–28 (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 323.*



THURSDAY 11.26.20 Luke 12:15-21

The truly valuable riches

Jesus lived a very simple life—in Luke 9:58, he told a would-be follower that he didn't even have a permanent dwelling. In the parable we read today, he highlighted what he called “false appeal of wealth” (Matthew 13:22). Here was a rich man who was not finding joy now, because he didn't have room enough to store all his additional wealth. But he expected to “eat, drink and enjoy” himself—someday. That's why Jesus warned again “all kinds of greed”—earthly wealth never produces the deepest joys life can offer.

- Christian author John Ortberg wrote about this story, “Jesus was very frank in his diagnosis. He doesn't say the man was evil or wicked. He just calls him a fool. Why does Jesus use this harsh word? The man did not deliberately set out...to defy God....He just devoted his life to the wrong things.” * What different choices do you believe the rich man in Jesus' parable could have made to be “rich toward God”? Are you making those kinds of choices?
- Jesus warned us to “be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” What different kinds of greed have you experienced? How can you assess whether you are getting your sense of meaning and value from material things? How do you define “success”? How easy or hard do you find it to accept Jesus' teaching that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be rich—“rich toward God,” that is. Please shape my heart and my choices in ways that will continue to lead me to that kind of life. Amen.

DID YOU KNOW?

Simplicity and generosity lead to joy, and also help our planet. Americans generate 25% more waste (about 1 million extra tons of trash) between Thanksgiving and New Year's. Consider not using disposable tableware, using less gift wrap and/or repurposing what you use, and maybe giving loved ones non-material gifts.

** John Ortberg, When the Game Is Over, It all Goes Back in the Box. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007, pp. 25-26. (This book is worth your time if you haven't thought seriously about what God asked the rich farmer in Jesus' story.)*



FRIDAY 11.27.20 **Philippians 2:1-11, Hebrews 12:2**

Jesus “emptied himself” —for joy!

Who had more possessions and prerogatives to protect, more power and prestige to guard, than Jesus? But he didn’t exploit or cling to that. Jesus’ example showed us how we need to relate to our possessions and our prestige. This early hymn Paul quoted honored Jesus, but not by starting with his power or majesty. It praised his readiness to “empty himself” to become the Savior we needed.

- Which possessions do you think of as “must have,” and couldn’t imagine living without? What “perks” are so indispensable that you are upset if they aren’t automatically offered to you? What does Jesus’ example say to the beliefs and assumptions by which you lead your life? How do you believe Jesus “ignored the shame” for the sake of the joy laid out in front of him?
- Estimate how many ads you’ve read or heard in the last week that use phrases like “you deserve it,” “you’re worth it,” and so on. The early Christian hymn Paul quoted said Jesus “emptied himself” (verse 7). How did Jesus’ values differ from the ones Rome, Greece (and much of 21st-century America) thought make for genuine joy and success in life? Who do you believe was right? (Okay, you know you’re supposed to say “Jesus” —but is that really what you believe?)

Prayer: Loving Lord, I’m human, and sometimes I have big, expensive wishes. Keep reshaping me, making those wishes into wishes to faithfully serve you and others. Amen.



SATURDAY 11.28.20 Acts 2:41-47

Sharing with gladness and simplicity

The very first “Christians” (they didn’t even call themselves that yet—cf. Acts 11:26) were a fairly small, largely unknown group, living in a city that had crucified their Lord. But they lived out their faith in ways that have changed the world for over 2000 years now. The apostles’ teaching, prayer, fellowship and a radical spirit of joyous generosity bound them together. They found such joy and meaning in their lives that they told others, who invited others, who invited others and so on until eventually someone invited you. And now it’s your turn to keep the story going.

- The teachings of the apostles and the power of the Holy Spirit moved the first Christians to share their possessions, setting aside their own gain to bless others. That spirit made their lives joyous, not miserable—“they shared food with gladness.” How does your readiness to find joy in sharing with others reflect God’s impact on your life? How do you respond inwardly to being part of a congregation that specifically and intentionally exists to reach beyond our walls, to reach, serve and uplift our neighbors and our communities?

Prayer: Generous, joy-giving God, I offer you my gratitude. Help me to be willing to adjust my life in whatever ways I need to so that my gratitude isn’t just words, but joyful service to you and to your children. Amen.

Family Activity:

As Christmas approaches, explore the ways you spend and give money and possessions. Gather or create the following: play money, pictures of items a child might want to buy (toys, vacation, junk food) and pictures of ways to give (missionary, charity, church). Assign an approximate purchase price to each item. Pass out play money, giving each family member a different amount. Show your family their choices of items to buy and ways to give. Invite your family to spend their play money however they like by purchasing the items on pictures or giving to places/ people in need. After each person has spent their money, read Mark 12:41-44. Discuss the choices people made. Then choose one way to give money and/or time as a family this month. Ask God to help you become cheerful givers this season and always.