

*And Their Joy Was Very Great*

**Nehemiah 8:9-12**

John Breon

As we celebrate “Holy Humor Sunday,” we’re going to look at what this passage says about joy.

By the way, we used to wonder who the smallest man in the Bible is. Some thought it was “Knee-high-miah.” Others said it was Bildad the “shoe-height” (Shuhite; Job 8:1). But the smallest man in the Bible was the Roman guard—he slept on his watch.

In the early centuries of the church there arose the celebration of “Bright Sunday,” the Sunday after Easter. It was celebrated with joyous songs, feasting, jokes, and laughter. Maybe we need more Sundays like this.

Rufus Mosely was a preacher of an earlier generation. Someone asked him, “Did Jesus laugh?” He replied, “I don’t know, but he sure fixed me up so that I could!” (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Autobiography of God* 165).

Frederick Buechner is a powerful and moving writer. He calls attention to laughter in the Bible, especially in the story of Abraham and Sarah:

Quantitatively speaking, you don’t find all that much laughter in the Bible, but qualitatively, there’s nothing quite like it to be found anywhere else. There are a couple of chapters in the Book of Genesis that positively shake with it. Sarah was never going to see ninety again, and Abraham had already hit one hundred, and when the angel told them that the stork was on his way at last, they both of them almost collapsed. Abraham laughed “till he fell on his face” (Gen. 17:17), and Sarah stood cackling behind the tent door so the angel wouldn’t think she was being rude as the tears streamed down her cheeks. When the baby finally came, they even called him Laughter—which is what Isaac means in Hebrew—because obviously no other name would do. ...

Sarah and her husband had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment

when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough (Gen. 17, 18, 21). (from *Peculiar Treasures*, quoted in Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, eds., *Spiritual Classics*, 314-16)

Have you ever tried to keep from laughing when you were supposed to be quiet? You feel the power of laughter then. Once when I was in college, the drama department put on "Hamlet." It's one of Shakespeare's great tragic plays. There's not much happiness or celebration in it. They did this performance on a small stage and set up chairs on three sides so the audience could be close to the action. The chairs were on risers about four rows high. I was sitting next to a friend of mine on the front row and another friend of ours was sitting across from us.

At one particularly dramatic moment, we heard a clatter and crash behind us. Obviously a chair had fallen off the top row. The play was going on and we couldn't turn and look. A few minutes later, we heard some more noise from the top row and then another crash. It was all we could do to keep from laughing out loud. But the actors were bravely carrying on, so we stifled our laughter until our sides ached. We looked across at our friend who could see what was going on behind us and he was clutching his side and almost doubled over.

Finally the play was over and we found out what had happened. There was a guy sitting on the top row who moved over to another chair. He leaned back and fell off the riser. After getting the chair back up and then climbing up, he sat down, leaned back and fell off again. He wasn't hurt, so it was o.k. to laugh.

Christian celebration says go ahead and laugh—not at people's misfortune—but at the goodness of God, at ourselves, for the sheer joy of being alive in God's world. For the forgiveness of our sins. For Jesus' resurrection victory. Rejoice in the Lord always. Go ahead and sing for joy. Go ahead and celebrate.

That's what Nehemiah, Ezra, and some Levites told the people of Judah on one occasion. In Nehemiah 8, the scene is in Jerusalem some time after the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon. The city wall has been rebuilt. The people gather in the city and Ezra the priest reads publicly from the scroll of the Law. He reads for about four hours to a crowd of men and women who listen attentively. Some Levites (worship leaders) translate and interpret so the people can understand. The people weep as they hear the Law of God. Maybe they were feeling convicted for breaking God's Law. But their leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, tell them not to weep because it's a holy day. They should rather feast and celebrate. The people hear this encouraging word: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD, the joy you have in the LORD, is your strength." So the people have a feast and they share with others who don't have anything. They also celebrate one of the great yearly festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles. They celebrate this feast like they never have before. "And their joy was very great" (8:17).

What can we get from this story that can help us have joy that gives us strength? What can bring us to the place where our joy is very great?

It seems that joy comes in simple and basic aspects of life with God. There's understanding the word of God, sharing with others, and the sacraments.

Ezra the priest reads the Scriptures to the people. Teachers interpret the Scriptures so people can understand. And the people respond to the word. Ezra was probably reading in Hebrew, while the people's primary language was Aramaic. Those languages are similar, but the people need help to understand. It's great to have translations of the Bible that we can understand so we don't have to learn Hebrew and Greek. One of my professors said, "I know a little Hebrew and a little Greek. One owns a delicatessen and one owns a restaurant." Not only are there numerous translations of the Bible in English, but there are efforts to translate the Bible into all kinds of languages all over the world.

But even when we have the Bible in our own language, we still need help understanding and applying it. So we have teachers and writers who help us interpret the Scriptures. One of my favorite things to do is help you know what the Bible actually says and help you understand it.

Associate pastors get to do all kinds of things. When I was an associate at a large church in Kansas City, one of my jobs was to supervise singles' volleyball in the gym on Thursday nights. I also taught various Bible studies. One spring I did an introduction to the Bible. On the last night of the study, a man who usually played volleyball attended. I asked the class to write evaluations. This man wrote, "After seeing you play volleyball, I'm surprised you know so much about the Bible." I'm still trying to figure that one out!

The Bible is one way God reveals himself and his will to us. It's a big, complex collection of writings. We all need help, we need each other to read and understand and live according to the Scriptures.

When we hear the Scriptures read and explained, we respond. The people in Jerusalem responded by weeping. Memories and present experience and repentance and longing come together in sorrow, so they weep. We appreciate healing when we've known brokenness. When sorrow turns to joy, it is great joy.

We often hear that humor comes out of pain. Comedians often develop their comedy in response to brokenness and pain in their lives. One of the funniest people I've known was my friend Randy. We grew up together and graduated from high school together. He was clever and witty and could be hilarious. One day in a speech class, he did a humorous speech (really, a comedy routine) that had us rolling with laughter. I don't know if he made up the story as he went along or if he had it prepared. He used props to tell a really silly story. But we laughed so much and so loud that the principal came out of his office to our class to see what was going on. And the principal soon began to laugh along with us. But Randy had a lot of pain in his life—from a broken home and a stepfather he didn't get along with. He told me once, "I wish I'd had a dad."

But weeping gives way to laughter. Sorrow can turn to joy when we hear the Lord's word and when we're encouraged to rejoice and celebrate. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the people to enjoy choice food and sweet drinks. Literally, it says, "eat of the fat and drink of the sweet." They were to celebrate with a feast. Then there's this interesting line: "send some to those who have nothing prepared." The Lord's feast is not something to

keep to ourselves. It's for sharing. One of the jokes someone sent me was, "Do you know why lobsters don't share? Because they're *shellfish*." Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Paul says that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The word for cheerful there is *hilaron*. God loves a hilarious giver. Can we give with joy and hilarity, trusting God to provide and bless and use our giving?

So the people enjoy a feast. Then they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. This was a festival that commemorated Israel's time in the wilderness after they were delivered from Egypt and before they entered the promised land. It was a time when they wandered and lived in tents, when God guided them from place to place and provided for them. During the festival, they were to cut tree branches and make shelters to stay in. This festival included feasting and celebrating. And during this particular festival, their joy was very great.

All through Scripture, eating together is a sign of covenant and commitment. Feasts are celebrations of God's goodness and mercy. They are also signs of the fulfillment of God's promises when God's kingdom fully comes. In Jesus' ministry, he ate with all kinds of people. Jesus shares fellowship with sinners and brings them into a new relationship with God. On the night before he died, Jesus shared a Passover meal with his disciples. That was another great festival for the Jews to remember and celebrate God's delivering them from slavery. At that meal, Jesus introduced a new covenant, a new agreement between God and people.

Holy Communion is for us a feast of joy. We give thanks to God for all that he's done in Jesus Christ as we remember his death on the cross and his resurrection for our forgiveness and deliverance. We rejoice in God's presence with us now through the Holy Spirit. When we receive in faith, we know the real presence of Christ in Communion. We also get a foretaste of God's heavenly banquet—that's a symbol of the time when all God's children are gathered together in God's glorious presence for ever.

There's a Communion hymn that I don't know well, but it has great lyrics:

I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free,  
in awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,  
the new community of love in Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.  
The love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends.

And thus with joy we meet our Lord. His presence always near,  
is in such friendship better known; we see and praise him here.

Together met, together bound, we'll go our different ways,  
and as his people in the world, we'll live and speak his praise.

(Brian Wren, *The United Methodist Hymnal* #617)