This morning, we continue our new series, “The Life You’ve Always Wanted.” The life our Lord wants for us, a life of knowing God and being loved by God, a life of love, joy and peace, is a life with the very features you and I have always wanted. Last week, Glenda helped us consider what vision we have for the lives we have always wanted and, today, we talk about the experience of joy, which is a facet of the life all of us have always wanted. I can’t think of an easier Sunday to talk about joy than on Vacation Bible School Sunday! There are, of course, many sources of joy and all kinds of joy. As the Apostle Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Last week, I was in the city of Pittsburgh attending the nine-day meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, which is the highest governing body of our denomination. One afternoon, I was walking in the convention center where, on one side of a giant room, there were over six hundred commissioners (delegates) debating and voting on various issues and on the other side of the room was some stadium seating for onlookers to watch the proceedings. I was walking in the open space between the commissioners and the onlookers. I had a satchel over my left shoulder, and I was carrying a full cup of coffee in my left hand. Suddenly, Mike Holohan sees me. Mike grew up in the congregation I served right there in Pittsburgh. He is dear to Ann Marie and me. In fact, one of the last things Ann Marie and I did before moving here from there was to attend his wedding.

Mike saw me, but he did not see the coffee cup I was holding. With a giant grin on his face he cries, “Stan,” and runs up and gives me a bone-crushing hug. Whatever joy is, that was joy! At the same time, the coffee cup flies straight up in the air and lands on the concrete floor with a whoosh splattering coffee in a four-foot circle. Rather quickly, a ring of laughing joyful people stood around the mess so no one would slip on it while others ran for some paper towels. A friend told me later it was one of the few moments of actual joyful fellowship she had witnessed that week, which had me thinking of getting some more cups of coffee to spill!
Joy in seeing a loved friend. Joy in cleaning up a mess. There are many kinds of joy. About two years ago, I was standing in the NICU, the neo-natal intensive care unit of a hospital in Palo Alto, California. Standing next to our son, Lee, I was looking at his twin sons, Jackson and Weston. Lee said to me, “Dad, aren’t they the cutest babies you have ever seen?” That created a brief dilemma because, while they were fabulously, adorably cute and perfect in every way, I have seen three insanely cute babies, Lee, himself, and his two sisters, who also were perfect in every way! At which point I realized that while I found great joy in seeing the sons of my son that actually my greatest joy was watching his joy in his children. There is no greater joy for a parent than the joy of one’s children. Jesus Christ said, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). The joy of our Lord is in the joy of you, his people!

So, while there are many sources and kinds joy described in the Scriptures, two basic ones are our present joy and our future joy. Present joy, whether it’s a hug from a friend or a flying coffee cup or a child or grandchildren or Vacation Bible School, present joy up-lifts us right here, right now. Future joy is the assurance that, ultimately, all things will work together for the good for those that love God, and we will know the joyful reality of the words of Jesus: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). Future joy is the later-on-joy that sustains our spirits through the times when life is tough.

In our text for this morning, the Apostle Paul embraces both the present joy that uplifs us and the future joy that sustains us when he says, “Rejoice in the Lord, always.” What fascinates me about these words of Paul is that the Philippian people he is speaking to are not in a joyful mood. They are having a bad day at the office. Two people in the Philippian church with the names of Euodia [you-oh’-dia] and Syntyche [sin’-tick-ee] are having some kind of squabble that has upset everyone. Who knows what made Euodia mad or ticked off Syntyche (or Syntychied her off) but they sure are not sharing in the fun, peppy laughter of present joy, and any concept of a future joy is utterly forgotten. Paul appeals to them to be of the same mind in the Lord. He asks a loyal friend of his to help them work out their differences. And his very next words are, “Rejoice in the Lord,” and not just “rejoice in the Lord,” but “rejoice in the Lord, always.” Always means always –
One way to think about the ideas of present joy and future joy is that present joy is about thanking God and future joy is about trusting God.

including in this case in the midst of the disturbance being caused by Euodia and Syn-tyche. To make himself really clear, Paul repeats himself so he actually says, “Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say rejoice.”

Paul’s most significant words here are “in the Lord,” “rejoice in the Lord.” So he isn’t saying rejoice when you are feeling lousy or asking you to have a baseless optimism or some power of positive thinking. He is simply saying the basis for our true joy is beyond our immediate circumstances and is based on the presence of our Lord. And so he reinforces his word by saying, “The Lord is near.” As Nehemiah wonderfully puts it in the Old Testament, “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

One way to think about the ideas of present joy and future joy is that present joy is about thanking God and future joy is about trusting God. So first we see present joy is for thanking God whenever there are moments in our lives when we experience the joy that uplifts. Last month, all of our children and grandchild and Ann Marie’s mother came to stay in our home for nearly two weeks. We had more fun than we should have been allowed to have. Laughter and warmth filled the house. Sometimes, rejoicing in the Lord always is just plain easy! The key is to be aware that when joyful,

wonderful moments come your way, it is the Lord who loves you who finds joy in your joy, and give thanks to him.

When I was in graduate school at Purdue University, our nation was experiencing a marvelous spiritual revival that was known as the Jesus Movement. It was when a great many others and I discovered the person of Jesus to be the one to whom we would give our lives, the one we would follow. I found myself doing graduate research during the days and leading a Christian coffeehouse at night. We called it the Natural High Coffeehouse.

When Megan Kritsky was preparing the PowerPoint for us, she actually found pictures of the Natural High online. I was stunned, finding myself transported back forty years in a flash. You want to talk about present joy? We rented an unused empty storefront on a street in Lafayette, Indiana, used turned over discarded giant wooden cable spools from the electric power company as tables, and in the midst of guitar-based Christian folk music and free Coca Cola, we saw dozens of young people give themselves to Jesus. That is where I first learned that the Christian faith is not simply about church buildings and worship services and various church programs but that it is primarily about changing lives, about people actually discovering the lives they always wanted to have.
After we had operated the Natural High Coffeehouse for a year, the landlord, who rented us the storefront property, told us the rent was going to go way up and, let me tell you, as a rag-tag group of college and high school students with no one over the age of 22 involved, we had very few dollars among us. I can remember the anxiety, the uncertainty and the prayers and, in one of the most vivid memories of my life, the phone call. The landlord had relented. He was only going to charge us $50 a month. I had to drive somewhere after learning that, and I still remember nearly driving off the road with all the yelling, screaming and wahooing. The joy of the Lord is our strength. In the midst of a joyful moment in your life, remember to thank the Lord who is bringing joy to you and finding joy in you.

We also know the power of the future joy that sustains. When Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord, always,” that “always,” certainly embraced both present and future joy. There are times in our lives that feel very dark and clouded, when our experience of present joy is only a dim memory. Yet, as Psalm 30 puts it, “Weeping may linger for a night, but joy comes with the morning.” Sometimes life is pretty uncertain, pretty unstable, pretty uncomfortable, pretty painful and, during the present moments that are tough for us, we may trust that joy will come again, “in the morning.” The twenty-one year old son of some dear friends of ours died two weeks ago. The news messed me up. When I spoke with his mother last Tuesday she, spoke of her love and of her pain and of her knowledge that our Lord who loves her would walk with her and that is sustaining her today. That’s the life-sustaining strength of future joy that holds us up during the tough moments in our lives.

I am just delighted that we are heading into the Summer Olympics. I love the pageantry of the Olympics, and there is something wonderful and motivating about watching people who dream great dreams and who make great personal sacrifices to fulfill those dreams. It always challenges me to dream new dreams and be open to what new adventure our Lord has in mind. There is a famous text in the New Testament Book of Hebrews that certainly has an Olympic ring to it: 

1Therefore, 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, 

2looking 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).
The Christian life is not a walk in the park or evening stroll under the stars, but it is a focused effort over the long haul—however, it's a focused effort with a wonderful goal—our future joy in the presence of Jesus.

It describes the Christian life in terms of a foot race—and not a sprint but a life-long marathon. The New Testament word translated “race” is *agon*, from which we have the word agony, implying effort. If I go jogging a couple of miles, even during such a short run my body is talking to me because of the *agon*, the effort: “Whoa, relax, stop. This is effort! Why are you doing this to me?” But the author of Hebrews cuts right to the chase. The Christian life is not a walk in the park or evening stroll under the stars, but it is a focused effort over the long haul—however, it’s a focused effort with a wonderful goal—our future joy in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus, himself, knew of his future joy at the right hand of God, and by focusing on that joy and trusting in God his Father, Jesus was able to hang in there with the present suffering of the cross. His future joy sustained him through his present struggle. In just the same way as you and I trust that our future joy is in Jesus, we have staying power, sustaining strength to work through the tough moments of our lives. As Jesus put it, 21 A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. 22 So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy (John 16:21-22).

So there is the present joy that uplifts us and the future joy that sustains us. And what role do we play? Future joy is about trusting God through whatever you are going through. Present joy is about thanking God for the joys in our lives. Actually, when it comes to present joy, there is a lot we can do. Be alert to the joys in your life right now. Look for ways to introduce healthy joy into your home, look for ways to bring love and laughter into the lives of those with whom you share life. It might be a hug. It might be a trip to the ice cream store. It might be doing the dishes. It might be flowers to express love. It might be a day at the park. It certainly is building deep trusting and mutually valuing relationships in your home. It is the practice of reconciliation and the up-building of one another in love.

A family in the East was planning a month's vacation to the West Coast. At the last minute, the father's work prevented him from going. Mom insisted she was capable of driving and, with the kids, went on ahead. Dad had marked the maps with the route and places where the family would sleep each night. Two weeks later, the father finished his work and decided to surprise his family by flying to the West Coast without telling them. He then took a taxi out into the country on a highway
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that, according to the travel plan, the family should be driving on later that day. The taxi driver dropped him off on the side of the road.

The Dad waited there watching the cars go by until he saw the family car coming, then stuck his thumb as a hitchhiker. As Mom and the kids drove past, they did a double take. One of the kids said, "Hey, wasn't that Dad?" Mom screeched to a stop, backed up to the hitchhiker and the family had a joyful reunion. Later, when asked why he would do such a crazy thing, he responded, "After I die, I want my kids to be able to say, 'Dad sure was fun, wasn't he?'" Our Lord wants you to journey into the present joy that uplifts you today—and to trust in the coming future joy that will sustain you through your trials of today.

The bottom line is this. If you want to journey into the joy of Jesus, then grow in your knowing of Jesus. The joy that Jesus offers is not the denial of present suffering, it is not merely the power of positive thinking or a baseless optimism. It is the state of a person who knows our Lord’s instruction book, the Bible, leans on and trusts the Lord who loves us more than you love your next breath. Rejoice in the Lord—always—and again, I say, rejoice!

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