

Hebrews 12:1-2

June 30, 2019

Christian Virtues Series: Joy

“What Does the World Need Now?”

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Westminster Shorter Catechism – 1st Question – “What is the Chief end of humankind?”

Answer – “To glorify God and enjoy [God] forever...”

Why? How? To what end?

Well, let’s look to a few other Scriptures...

Isaiah 12:3, “With Joy we draw water from the wells of salvation...”

Psalms 32:11, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad...”

Psalms 5:11-12, “Let all who take refuge in you be glad, let them ever sing for joy!”

Luke 2:10-20, Jesus’ birth narrative, the Angel messenger brings, “...tidings of great joy...”

Matthew 28:8, Jesus’ resurrection fills those he encounters with a mix of, “fear & great joy...”

Luke 15:7, 10, as discerned at VBS this week via the parables, “...there is great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents and is found...”

Another of our Presbyterian Creeds declares, “we belong [in life and in death] to almighty God” – and for that we can be grateful and over-joyed.

CS Lewis, in his book *Letters to Malcom*, described heaven’s serious business is “joy.” Lewis writes:

“I do *not* think that the life of Heaven bears any analogy to play or dance in respect of frivolity. I do think that while we are in this ‘valley of tears,’ cursed with labour, hemmed round with necessities, tripped up with frustrations, doomed to perpetual plannings, puzzlings, and anxieties, certain qualities that must belong to the celestial condition have no chance to get through, can project no image of themselves, except in activities which, for us here and now, are frivolous.

For surely, we must suppose the life of the blessed to be an end in itself, indeed The End: to be utterly spontaneous; to be the complete reconciliation of boundless freedom with order—with the most delicately adjusted, supple, intricate, and beautiful order?

How can you find any image of this in the ‘serious’ activities either of our natural or of our (present) spiritual life? Either in our precarious and heart-broken affections or in the Way which is always, in some degree, a *via crucis*¹?

No, Malcolm. It is only in our ‘hours-off,’ only in our moments of permitted festivity, that we find an analogy. Dance and game *are* frivolous, unimportant down here; for ‘down here’ is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment’s rest from the life we were place(d) here to live.

But in this world, everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”²

We weren’t put here to just exist. We are to enjoy God & each other.

The American Psychological Association defines “joy” as follows:

“(n) ...a feeling of extreme gladness, delight, or exultation of the spirit arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction. The feeling of joy may take two forms: passive and active. **Passive** joy involves tranquility and a feeling of contentment with things as they are. **Active** joy involves a desire to share one’s feelings with others. It is associated with more engagement of the environment than is passive joy. The distinction between passive and active joy may be related to the intensity of the emotion, with active joy representing the more intense form. Both forms of joy are associated with an increase in energy and feelings of confidence and self-esteem.”³

“Joy” breathes life into weary, tired souls.

I believe, the author of Hebrews describes what CS Lewis also talked about, *having “joy” in spite of life’s circumstances...*

Therefore, 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, looking 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)

In 2001, the American Psychological Association featured an article entitled, “Where happiness lies” – the article chronicled the conversation that was starting among social scientists as they

¹ [way of the cross]

² As found on the following website: <https://tollelege.wordpress.com/2009/11/24/joy-is-the-serious-business-of-heaven-by-c-s-lewis/> [-C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego: Harvest, 1964), 92-93.]

³ <https://dictionary.apa.org/joy>

were beginning to reveal research findings in the realm of positive psychology. This was the second annual conference, in which, conference coordinator, Ed Diener, PhD, of the University of Illinois, posed the following question, “Why are there 200 of us here today?”

He answered his question, “We've tapped into something important that people are yearning to learn about. When you are laying awake at night, you are not thinking about how do I get from minus eight to minus five, you are asking about going from feeling plus two to plus 12.... Psychology never told us to do that. Until now, psychology has been all about making life less minus.”

No one asks, how can I be just a little less miserable...rather, we ask how can I be better – how can I be what I was created to be – in the church we pose it in terms of what is my calling – where do my gifts meet the needs of this world – what can God do through me...we don't just want to feel less pain...we want joy to abound and exude from our very being...

The positive psychology movement, founded in part by Martin Seligman, PhD, former APA President, is a supplement to negative social science and psychology – choosing to focus on what's good in life rather than fixing what's wrong.

As Seligman puts it, “I like the idea of behavior leading toward a goal. Maybe there are a set of experiences people can be led to have by doing spontaneous philanthropic activities in which they have the insight that there is a better way of being happy. That power, money, drugs or shopping are not the only possibilities.”⁴

In the church, we might say, “it's about finding where joy resides.”

In essence, joy can be a choice, joy can be cultivated and grown in our lives by how we choose to nurture it daily – perhaps that is why the Apostle Paul lists “joy” as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5 – for something to bear fruit it must be cared for and nurtured – not just used up and tossed aside.

“Fruit,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “is always the miraculous, the created; it is never the result of willing, but always a growth. The fruit of the Spirit is a gift of God, and only he can produce it. They who bear it know as little about it as the tree knows of its fruit. They know only the power of him on whom their life depends.”⁵

“Joy” begins, in part, when we can recognize *it* resides “outside of ourselves” – set apart from our circumstances – namely out-side – out there – beyond our little corners of *hemmed in-ness*. I've seen and experienced it at workcamp – when asked to share a “joy” moment from workcamp, one of the members responded, “There were so many, but definitely the most joy-filled moment for me was watching my neighbor roll down his ramp for the first time and regaining some freedom since before this he was literally homebound. I will say though, I definitely received more than I gave last week!”

⁴ See <https://www.apa.org/monitor/jan01/positivepsych> for quotes and more on the 2001 conference.

⁵ —Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), 284-85.

It sounds like so many other mission team reports – this idea that we receive more than we expected or even expended on the mission team journey.

Joy is cultivated when we brighten up a room with our cheerful attitude.
When we make others glad just to be around us, and we give hope to others.
When lives are filled with words of encouragement and positive, forward-looking thinking.

The paradox of “joy” is that it is an attribute of Christian living that can’t be sustained – by our own doing – that said, true joy is not something we can pull out of thin air – though the more we prepare the soil of our lives through such things as practicing gratitude; having a sense of awe & wonder for the creation around us; or practicing hospitality; – the more we cultivate the soil of our lives, the better chance we have to recognize and receive joy-filled moments.

Often joy can get confused with happiness – and while happiness, I believe, is a by-product of joy – happiness can be fleeting – you see, anyone can experience spikes of joy induced by happy moments. You get a raise or promotion, you win \$5 in the lottery, your sister’s having a baby, or the home team scored on a squeeze play in the bottom of the 12th inning.

These moments of joy are induced by temporary happy moments.

Christian joy differs from this kind of joy in that a Christian can experience a joy inspired happiness in so many other circumstances. As Christ’s disciples, we experience a rush of joy when sinners repent, when **we** repent, when an addict celebrates another day or year of sobriety, when given an opportunity to serve, when someone has a success, when others are honored in their place, or when we can simply pray for someone in need.

This type of joy is not something we can manufacture for this is a joy which springs forth from the Holy Spirit. When we experience this kind of joy, it’s from God, and it looks a lot like what Jesus referenced when he said to his disciples, “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).

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, writes, “Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community who pray or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians — people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”⁶

May we, the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church as part of the church universal – Christ’s hands and feet at work in this community and in this world – be a part of that something beautiful – may we bear joy into this world – may we glorify and enjoy God forever by how we treat one another – may we cultivate joy by following the brighter glimmer of light we know – may we

⁶ —Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor Books, 2000), 100.

like the Hebrews writer reminds, “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” & may we embrace and embody joy along the way.

For that is what the world needs now and always.

Amen and Amen.