

JOY IS A SERIOUS MATTER

⁴*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*
⁵*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* ⁶*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*
⁷*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* ⁸*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* ⁹*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*
(Philippians 4:4-9, NRSV)

He led armies and won great battles. His name hung on the lips of influential people on both sides of the Atlantic. He could have whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. And yet, amidst all of his power, position, and glory, Napoleon Bonaparte said, “I have never known six happy days in my life” (Thomas S. Kepler, *Jesus’ Design for Living: 40 Meditations on the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 39). She was born with her five senses intact. Unfortunately, due to scarlet fever or possibly meningitis when she was 19-months-old, she lost the ability to see, hear, and speak. Through sheer determination, intellect, and with the tireless help of a dedicated teacher, this young woman, who seemingly lost it all, instead graduated from high school and college. She became one of the most celebrated women of her day and remains a legend in ours. She is of course Helen Keller who once joyfully exclaimed, “I have found life so beautiful” (Ibid.). The contrast is extreme between Napoleon, conqueror of nations who

found life utterly joyless, and Helen Keller, who had every reason to despair and yet found joy.

The grass is not always greener on the other side. A life that should thrive, a life that should glow a vibrant growing green may instead exhibit death and decay. Another life that should wither and die instead thrives and flowers despite the odds.

Suffering is a given in life, guaranteed in varying degrees to each and every human being. Joy, on the other hand, while a universal human goal, is not guaranteed. To find joy we must make peace with the givens of life—we are born and we will die. In-between these givens we will experience some degree of suffering, but with any luck we will also experience love, meaning, hope, and joy.

Feelings of happiness come and go depending on our external circumstance the same way a thermometer goes up and down depending on the temperature. On the other hand, joy does not come and go with every passing mood. True joy runs deep in the human heart and soul. For people of faith, joy rests on the bedrock of our core beliefs about life and death. We don't experience joy because of success, wealth, status or any other external prize. These may bring temporary happiness but are of no lasting value. Happiness can be wiped out by misfortune and mishaps beyond our control. Joy, real joy, lasts in spite of the calamities of life for joy arises out of our connection with the eternal, out of our relationship with God.

Roman philosopher, orator, and playwright, Seneca, once said, "Real joy, believe me, is a serious matter" (Ibid. p. 38). Until we make peace with the serious matter of suffering, we will never know true joy. Dr. Forrest Church, son of the late Senator Frank Church of Idaho and current senior minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New

York City, writes, “When cast into the depths, to survive we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can. As to the former, until we free ourselves from an attachment to false sources of security and let go of our illusions, we will remain in the abyss. With respect to the latter, the most important thing to remember is that lifelines have two ends. To grasp one end, however tightly, avails us nothing unless the other end is secured. Unless we reach out to and for others, seeking meaning not in our own suffering but in our shared experience of the human condition, our lifelines will not hold” (Forrest Church, *Life Lines: Holding On (And Letting Go)*, p. xv).

As Christians, the lifeline we grasp is held firmly and eternally by God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The Apostle Paul knew this and he knew that true joy was not based on external circumstance; rather joy and contentment come from faith in God. Sitting in a jail cell in Rome awaiting trial and execution, Paul wrote, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (4:11b-13).

Early in life, Paul knew privilege and a degree of happiness, but not peace, joy, and contentment. He was educated at the finest schools and became a rising star in the ranks of the ultra-religious Pharisees. But he left that life behind when he converted to Christianity. Where previously Paul had led a sheltered life, his new passion for Christ meant being beaten and thrown in jail. Where in the past Paul got the royal treatment from his fellow Pharisees, now Paul got run out of town on a regular basis and was eventually beheaded in Rome. And yet here’s a man who writes from a jail cell about being content and joyful.

Paul learned how to count his blessings when his ministry bore fruit, when he was housed and well fed, and Paul learned how to still count himself lucky even when he was lying in a dingy jail cell. Paul's secret was his faith. In his heart, he knew that he was doing God's work and that his life was forever held in the palm of God's hand. Paul's faith gave him great joy and the strength to face the good times and the bad, knowing that when all was said and done, God had the last word.

In a classic passage from his Roman jail cell, Paul wrote, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7). Paul gives us practical advice: don't worry, pray and let God know your requests.

It seems like the next line should be, "...and God will give you what you asked for." After all, doesn't getting what we asked for soothe our anxiety and calm our fears? Not necessarily. Paul found that peace and joy came not from getting what he wanted, but from having what he needed most, a thriving faith, a divine purpose in life, and a solid connection to God.

The Apostle Paul was not some wide-eyed, naïve wishful thinker. He did not waste away his life daydreaming about life on easy street. He knew adversity first hand and abundant joy because of his firm faith in God. Where one might expect sorrow and cynicism, in the Apostle Paul we find love and hope.

For many of us the grass is always greener on the other side. We think if we had the wealth and influence of a J. Paul Getty we would finally have it made, we would finally be happy. But somewhere near the end of his life,

multimillionaire Getty "...cursed his wealth and said he would trade it all for one happy marriage" (Ibid. p. 158).

Having worked with thousands of people from every walk of life, minister Forrest Church said, "Just where you think that the grass should be green, it may be dying. I am no longer startled by this. What startles me still, though...is precisely the opposite. Often, just where you'd think that the grass would be dying, it is green" (Ibid. p. 159). We see evidence of this greening in the life of Helen Keller and in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Instead of wishful thinking about all that we don't have, Forrest Church encourages "thoughtful wishing." He says that, "Meaning doesn't emerge from longing for what we lack, things we have lost or will likely never find...And longing for something in the future may distract us from our enjoyment of the present...We should wish to think instead for things closer at hand: The courage to bear up under pain; the grace to take our success lightly; the energy to address tasks that need doing; the meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others; the liberation that follows when we forgive another; the comfort to be taken in opening our hearts to another; the joy to be gained even in the most common endeavor; the pleasure of another's company; the wonder that wells within the simple fact of our shared being" (Ibid. pp. 160-161).

With our feet grounded on the bedrock of God, our eyes open to the blessings surrounding us, and our hands busy serving others, joy, which is a serious matter, can be ours...seriously. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
February 19, 2006
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, Shepherd of our souls, without whom we are lost and prone to wander, help us know your voice so that when you call us by name, we may hear and follow. Keep us in the good fellowship of your flock, your church, that we may safely walk our earthly way and follow the footsteps of Jesus. In so doing may we experience joy, not as a passing phase, but as our constant companion in this life and in the life to come.

Through Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd we pray. AMEN.

Portions of the prayer were adapted from *Prayers for Public Worship*, compiled and edited by James Ferguson, p. 62.