

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino  
John 15:1-17  
June 30, 2024

## Joy

Good morning. It has been over a month since our mission team has returned from San Pedro Sula, Honduras. And so I wanted to give you a little report on what we experienced. Ten of us, Heather, Catherine, Sam, Seth, and Harrison Hartrim-Lowe, Jasper Suttin, Sophie Hickok, Janet Lind, Janet VanFleet, and I held vacation bible school for 160 students ages kindergarten to twelfth grade.

These children come from the poorest of the poor of one of the poorest countries in Central America. And yet, they arrive clean, happy, and eager to learn everyday. One of our favorite moments took place every morning at 6:50am when we would greet each child arriving at school with a hug. This routine of welcoming them in this way enforces the value of being loved and receiving appropriate physical affection from others. Truly we got more in return just seeing these beautiful faces every morning and saying “Buenas Dias.”

It was pure joy.

In the scripture that Janet selected for us this morning, Jesus described joy, where it comes from, and how we can get it for ourselves.

Jesus was at the last supper with his disciples, sharing very important things with them before he died. They were lingering around the table. Jesus washed his disciples feet. He told them about the events in the coming days. And he comforted them with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Then he launched into this segment about the importance of remaining in his love and not being disconnected from it.

So imagine with me, one of your favorite mealtime stories where you lingered around the table with those you loved and Jesus showed up to tell you the most important things he wanted you to remember of your time together over the years.

I’ll be reading from John 15:1-17. Listen for the part where Jesus talks about joy.

**15** Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. **3** You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4** Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

**5** “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. **6** If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

**9** “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **10** If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. **11** I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. **12** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. **17** This is my command: Love each other.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning, I’d like to talk about joy. We’ll look at what joy is and what it is not. We’ll see what the bible has to say about joy. We’ll consider those things that often rob us of joy. And finally we’ll challenge ourselves as to how we can be more intentional about choosing joy for our own lives.

So first what is joy?

Joy is an emotion that radiates from within us as a gift from God that is shared between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love...I have told you this so that my joy...the joy I experienced between the triune persons of God...may be in you.” So clearly Jesus desires to share with us the joy he has with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Our joy is to be an overflow of their joy. An outpouring of joy. A relational sense that all is well and that everything is as it should be.

We had many joyful experiences on our mission trip. In fact at the end of each day we shared where we experienced pure joy with the kids that day and also what struggles or challenges we encountered that would rob us of it. It was so fun to see the smiles on people’s faces as they described an interaction with a child, a teacher, or a staff person. Even with each other.

One of my joyful memories was just being with our wonderful team. This truly was a VBS dream team. We got along so well. Worked beautifully together as team. Supported one another. And we all had a lets give it a try and go with the

flow attitude. It was truly joyful to see it all come together so smoothly. I'm not saying that everything was roses. Especially since I got beat a cribbage by everyone that I taught how to play! But still that brought me a lot of joy sharing something I love with these people that I love.

Seriously though, joy is not a polyannaish thing. It does not close its eyes to the suffering around us. We can still acknowledge the world is suffering and not the way God intended it to be. But joy still can be found in even some of the most awful places.

Our mission team saw the community in which most New Hope's students live. Many live in wood pallet constructed shanties without proper sanitation, water, or roofs to keep out the rain. Many are one room homes where entire families and extended families sleep together. These kids have very little besides the school uniforms they proudly wear each day. And yet despite their utter poverty, they are so joyful. They radiate the same joy that Jesus shared with the Father that he wants each of us to have as well.

Joy is also not something we can keep to ourselves. It must be shared. And as we share it, it gives us even greater joy. In same way that Jesus shared his joy with the Father and the Spirit with his disciples and with us.

Our Mission team took our joy with us. We brought the Good News of Jesus with us. It's not that God wasn't working at New Hope before we got there, but we were able to bring the joy we each have and share that with the kids. Through our excitement with the games. Singing and dancing to the VBS songs. Teaching them beautiful crafts, and even practicing our broken Spanish, which they loved. Because the fact that we just tried to speak to them in their language communicated something about the love and joy we have in Jesus Christ.

Our goal was that they would have joy and that their joy would be complete. That's exactly what Jesus is talking about in these words.

But where else does the bible talk about joy?

In the Gospel of Luke, the angels announce to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

The Greek word that Luke uses for joy is *caran*. It means cheerfulness, calm delight, or exceeding gladness. It's the same word that Jesus used in our scripture today when he described how the same joy experienced within the trinity could be experienced ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:10-11

Jesus also told his disciples that they would have grief after he was gone, but then after a little while their grief would turn into joy.<sup>2</sup> Caran.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Philippians amidst a very divisive church conflict to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” He said, “I say again rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near!”<sup>3</sup>

He exhorted the Thessalonians in difficult circumstances “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

To the Roman Christians who suffered great persecution he said, “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that our sufferings produce perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”<sup>5</sup>

So according to the New Testament, joy is for all people. Not just for some. It is for all circumstances. And it is found in Christ, knowing that we are in Christ ourselves and there is nothing ever that can separate us from God’s love that is anchored, secured in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>6</sup> That is what gives us joy!

The Hebrew word for joy is “seem kha.” “Seem” literally means to put. And “kha” means laughing as in ha, ha, ha. So together it means “put to laughing” which implies that sometimes joy is a choice...something we must choose to experience joy though our circumstance may dictate otherwise.

In the Hebrew sense, “seem kha” is related to celebrations like dancing, singing, leaping, laughing, and making music. When the Ark of the Covenant was recovered from the Philistines and brought back into the temple, King David danced and made merry as the Ark was paraded back into town.<sup>7</sup> That’s “seem kha.”<sup>8</sup>

On the first day of our VBS it was so hot in our assembly room. We did not know that there was a huge ceiling fan that could circulate the air in the room. We sweated buckets as we played games and sang songs. It was miserable. But instead of complaining about it, we just laughed it off. “Seem kha!”

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<sup>2</sup> John 16:20

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:4-5

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

<sup>5</sup> Romans 5:2b-5

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:38-39

<sup>7</sup> 2 Samuel 6:14-22

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQlhFIsoY8w>

Psalm 30:12 says, “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with ‘seem kha’ or joy.”<sup>9</sup>

What often robs us of our joy?

In the example of King David that I mentioned above, other people may try to rob us of our joy. As David danced into the city before the Ark, Saul’s grieving daughter looked upon David with contempt. She hated him for the fact that he was so joyful, while she was full of grief. The point here is...be careful who you surround yourself with. Joyful people bring joy to others. Grumpy people make others grumpy. Don’t be around grumpy people. And if we’re a grumpy person, let us not rob others of their joy!

One of the best examples of overflowing joy I have ever known was Karen’s sweet Aunt Kitten. Aunt Kit was the epitome of an overflowing fountain of joy. If you had a bad day, Aunt Kit would spill over into your life and make you joyful. Even in her last days fighting ALS disease, having lost most of her muscle control, Aunt Kit could find something positive to say, “God has been so good to me.”

So our physical bodies can rob us of joy. There’s nothing worse than having chronic pain every day. Again like those kids at New Hope where they know that their poverty isn’t going away, they are still able to find joy in the small things of life and celebrate what they do have. Maybe in the same way, though our pain isn’t going away until we shed this outter shell, maybe we can find joy in the small things of life.

Busyness can rob us of joy. Look at the example of Martha, in Luke’s gospel. Martha was all bent out of shape because she had so much to do to feed her dinner guests that she missed out on the joy of spending time with Jesus in her house.<sup>10</sup> As we talked about two weeks ago, the best antidote for busyness is rest. If you didn’t hear that one check it out online.

Chasing wealth can rob us of joy.

Trying to please everyone can rob us of joy.

Succumbing to fear can rob us of joy. At the first VBS opening ceremony, I was so afraid of saying something wrong in Spanish that I was not very joyful. It wasn’t until I let go of the script and trusted my heart and used the talents of our interpreters that I began to experience joy in leading the opening and closing ceremonies.

And so many other things we could mention this morning as well.

How can we be more intentional about choosing joy for our own lives?

Sometimes we just need to decide that we are going to be joyful despite the circumstances around us.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 30:12

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:38-42

There was moment while we were playing a game when it became complete mayhem. The goal was to get all of the beach balls on your side onto your opponent's side without getting hit with a ball. Balls were flying everywhere. The kids were having so much fun just being kids.

Then we had an idea, what if we had all 40 kids against our VBS helpers and the kids' teachers. 40 against 10. The kids beat them badly but it was so much fun watching the teachers and students laugh together. Even though their work of teaching these kids is very serious, it was wonderful to create a space where they could let down their guard and laugh. I think it will be a moment that everyone will always remember.

If you want joy, put some laughter in your life. Seem-kha!

So may we let go of this sense that everything has to be perfect in order for us to experience joy. May we remain in God's love knowing that joy is a gift from God that overflows onto us from the joy experienced between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And may we be the kinds of people who radiate pure joy onto others.

Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete!" May it be so!

Amen.