

A SERMON PREACHED ON DECEMBER 17, 2017

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

From a webpage called "The Joy of Christmas Cards" comes this anecdote: A woman walks into the Post Office to buy stamps for her Christmas cards.

"What denomination?" asks the clerk.

"Oh, good heavens! Is this what we have we come to?" said the woman. "Well, then okay. Give me 50 Baptist, 50 Catholic, and 5 Episcopalians. That should do it!"ⁱ

Yes, we are at that time of Advent when we celebrate joy, and this close to Christmas there is usually an abundance of it, as we get ready to sing that old time favorite, "Joy To The World," first published in 1719 by the hymnwriter Isaac Watts. According to that all-knowing source, Wikipedia, it was the most published hymn in North America come the beginning of this century.ⁱⁱ In 1994 Mariah Carey sang a version wherein she included the music and lyrics of the Hoyt Axton/Three Dog Night version (that begins with one of the most famous opening lines in music history, i.e., "Jeremiah was a bullfrog..."), and joy has taken on a double emphasis ever since. I thought about this as I was trying to come up with other songs that include Joy as a theme. My sister reminded me of Granny on *The Beverly Hillbillies* singing the old gospel standard "I've Got Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart," written by the Unitarian minister George Willis Cooke sometime in the late 19th century. And then there is Johann Sebastian Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" from the 1720s. But that was all I could come up with. It seems that if joy is part of our worship experience, it is often quite elusive. That means we must clamor to reclaim it this morning, lest it be lost along with all the Christmas clutter that finds its way into our hearts and minds every year.

I thought to myself "just what is joy?" The Christian writer Justin B. Fung says "Joy is not happiness; it is not contingent upon circumstance. Joy is deeper, more rooted, and more connected with the person of God."ⁱⁱⁱ It's a feeling of great pleasure, and shares the synonyms tribulation, triumph, exultation, (all very militaristic), gladness, glee, exhilaration, exuberance, elation, euphoria, bliss, ecstasy, rapture, felicity, joie de vivre, pleasure, delight, treat, and thrill^{iv} - - demonstrating that there are probably more synonyms for the word than its actual usage. We don't use "joy" much in our everyday speech; it's kind of an old-fashioned word, or a religious word often snuck into a text by its cousin in meaning and makeup, the word "rejoice" (again not a word we use all that often.) Since I have been preaching using Top Ten Lists, I wondered if there were a top ten for what folks say bring them joy. I could have made up my own list, I guess, but I'm always interested in what the "world" is pondering. The closest thing I could find on the Internet

was “Pope Francis’ Top 10 Secrets for Happiness,” as published recently in the Argentine magazine *Viva*. The pope says the things we most need to do in order to bring us joy and to bring joy to the world are:

1. “Live and let live.” Everyone should be guided by this principle, he said, which has a similar expression in Rome with the saying, “Move forward and let others do the same.”
2. “Be giving of yourself to others.” People need to be open and generous toward others, he said, because “if you withdraw into yourself, you run the risk of becoming egocentric. And stagnant water becomes putrid.”
3. “Proceed calmly” in life. The pope, who used to teach high school literature, used an image from an Argentine novel by Ricardo Güiraldes, in which the protagonist — gaucho Don Segundo Sombra — looks back on how he lived his life.

“He says that in his youth he was a stream full of rocks that he carried with him; as an adult, a rushing river; and in old age, he was still moving, but slowly, like a pool” of water, the pope said. He said he likes this latter image of a pool of water — to have “the ability to move with kindness and humility, a calmness in life.”

4. “A healthy sense of leisure.” The pleasures of art, literature and playing together with children have been lost, he said.

“Consumerism has brought us anxiety” and stress, causing people to lose a “healthy culture of leisure.” Their time is “swallowed up” so people can’t share it with anyone.

Even though many parents work long hours, they must set aside time to play with their children; work schedules make it “complicated, but you must do it,” he said.

Families must also turn off the TV when they sit down to eat because, even though television is useful for keeping up with the news, having it on during mealtime “doesn’t let you communicate” with each other, the pope said.

5. Sundays should be holidays. Workers should have Sundays off because “Sunday is for family,” he said.

6. Find innovative ways to create dignified jobs for young people. “We need to be creative with young people. If they have no opportunities they will get into drugs” and be more vulnerable to suicide, he said.

“It’s not enough to give them food,” he said. “Dignity is given to you when you can bring food home” from one’s own labor.

7. Respect and take care of nature. Environmental degradation “is one of the biggest challenges we have,” he said. “I think a question that we’re not asking ourselves is: ‘Isn’t humanity committing suicide with this indiscriminate and tyrannical use of nature?’”

8. Stop being negative. “Needing to talk badly about others indicates low self-esteem. That means, ‘I feel so low that instead of picking myself up I have to cut others down,’” the pope said. “Letting go of negative things quickly is healthy.”

9. Don’t proselytize; respect others’ beliefs. “We can inspire others through witness so that one grows together in communicating. But the worst thing of all is religious proselytism, which paralyzes: ‘I am talking with you in order to persuade you,’ No. Each person dialogues, starting with his and her own identity. The church grows by attraction, not proselytizing,” the pope said.

10. Work for peace. “We are living in a time of many wars,” he said, and “the call for peace must be shouted. Peace sometimes gives the impression of being quiet, but it is never quiet, peace is always proactive” and dynamic.^v

But I wonder if peace is never quiet if joy usually is, and perhaps that is the reason we don’t hear so much about it in the Christmas story. The angel tells the shepherds that he or she (do angels possess gender? - - that’s a topic for another day...) is bringing the tidings of great joy that a child is born who is the Messiah, the Savior of the World. And the joy at the manger is not only the child itself but the feelings Mary and Joseph are pondering in their

hearts, a silent joy, a joy of wonder at the exuberance of new birth and the anticipation of what it will mean for this family. What was Mary thinking as all sorts of strangers approached the manger where the baby is said to have laid? In his contemporary song, "Mary, Did You Know?," the writer Mark Lowry gives us a glimpse into the thoughts of her heart:

Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know
That your Baby Boy has come to make you new?
This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you

Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy will calm the storm with His hand?
Did you know
That your Baby Boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little Baby, you kissed the face of God?
Oh, Mary did you know.

The blind will see
The deaf will hear
The dead will live again
The lame will leap
The dumb will speak
The praises of The Lamb

Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know
That your Baby Boy would one day rule the nations?
Did you know
That your Baby Boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
The sleeping Child you're holding is the great, I am^{vi}

If you don't know this song, there are many beautiful versions out there, and I highly recommend it as one of the best new Christmas songs to come along in years. Some of the versions on line, especially by the groups Pentatonix and Voctave will give you chills, and bring you great joy (as I understand the word), to be sure.

As I was searching for a bit of poetry to bring our thoughts into focus once again on the concept of joy, I was amazed at the amount written on the subject by great poets of all generations. A constant among them were their length - - how long it took for them to get to the point and pleasure of their joy, sometimes in page after page, verse after verse, was mind boggling. After reading ten or so poems dedicated to joy, I began to long for just a simple thought or two, and found this one breach in the poets' promise that expressed itself mildly mannered and simply put. It comes from the French philosopher and priest Teilhard de Chardin, who writes "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God."^{vii} In other words, if we are feeling joy it is because God is present to us and with us, and it is a forever promise made to us as part of the created order.

Because we are taught that God is love, it made me think of the Wesleyan hymn "Love Divine," that proclaims:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.^{viii}

As you prepare in your hearts to make him room, so that heaven and nature might sing within, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <http://jokes.cc.com/funny-god/pzj1tt/the-joy-of-christmas-cards>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_to_the_World

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.justinbfung.com/2012/10/12/joy-is-the-most-infallible-sign-of-the-presence-of-god/>

^{iv} <https://www.bing.com/search?q=joy&form=EDGEAR&q=PF&cvid=351502c6768e4dacadbec42f22da68d55c&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

^v <http://www.ucatholic.com/blog/10-secrets-for-happiness/>

^{vi} <https://www.bing.com/search?q=mary+did+you+know&FORM=EDGENA>

^{vii} http://whatanicewebsite.com/Connee/allowing_joy.htm

^{viii} <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/l/d/ldalexcl.htm>