

Fruit of the Spirit: The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

Nehemiah 8:9-10

Philippians 4:4-7

This summer, we are reflecting on the Fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23 the apostle Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Just before giving this list, he gives a list of the anti-fruit, we might call it—the weeds of the world that choke out the good fruit. If you want to see that list, go to Galatians 5:16-21. It's quite a list! I'd like to focus on the positive, so we'll stick with the list of the fruit of the Spirit.

This morning, we are looking at the second fruit on the list: joy. We just heard the beloved passage from Philippians. Now let's turn to our reading from Nehemiah. I'll explain the context of this short passage in a moment.

Nehemiah 8:9-10

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

It may seem a bit incongruous to talk about joy right now, with everything going on in our society and world. These are challenging times. Yet, when we study the topic of joy, and the practice of rejoicing in the Bible and throughout history, we find joy as an important—and I would even say essential—practice of God's people in *any and every circumstance*, and not just when things are bright and rosy.

For example, it might help us to remember that when the documents of the New Testament were written, they were written to Christians who were experiencing the beginnings of intense and violent persecutions. So, when the apostle Paul says in 1Thessalonians 5:16-18 (which sounds a lot like the Philippians 4 reading), "*Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus,*" he was not writing to people enjoying the comforts and ease of a stable and flourishing society, but to people who were under threat of being unjustly accused of crimes, jailed and publicly tortured for no reason except that Caesar was threatened by them because they claimed *Jesus Christ* as Lord and not Caesar as Lord.

Now, before I fully dive into this second fruit of the Spirit, I want to say that I'm not going to presume to tell anyone how they are supposed to feel; I'm not going to tell you don't worry be happy; or, let's all cheer up, everything will be fine. I do have hope, and I see signs of positive changes being made for the future—many of those hopeful changes being made under the radar and away from the headlines, which is why we have to pay closer attention, and even search for them. I think our society is on the brink of gaining traction on needed conversations and actions. But it's a bumpy ride, and probably will be for a while. So, we'll be riding a roller-coaster of emotions and thoughts, which is normal. So, we need to be realistic about where we are and what's going on, and honor our feelings about it, too, when we feel frustrated or overwhelmed or whatever we may feel.

Yet it is possible, and even necessary for us to practice rejoicing, and to have and express joy, in the midst of whatever we are feeling at any given moment. After all, joy is second on the list of the fruit of the Spirit, and it is one of the most prevalent themes in the Bible:

It's in Paul's admonition to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice!" from our reading in Philippians. Again, writing to people experiencing

persecution. It's all over the Psalms: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord" is an oft-repeated admonition.

Isaiah blesses God's people with these words: "You shall go out with joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will break forth before you, and there will be shouts of joy." That song is at the end of our service this morning!

Nehemiah encourages God's people with these words: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." I'll talk about that passage, and the Nehemiah story specifically, in a moment.

Almost all of the great saints and pilgrims throughout history identified joy as central to the Christian life. For example, Brother Lawrence, in his little book *Practicing the Presence of God* said: "Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God."

South African bishop Desmond Tutu authored a book titled *The Book of Joy* in which he stares into the abyss of despair and difficulty in the world and finds joy as the way out, and the way forward. Desmond Tutu spoke at Fuller seminary while Heidi and I were there and I was struck by his sense of humor and contagious laugh. As bishop, he wore one of those bishop hats, and part way through his talk about the challenges of leadership he took the hat off and said,

“See? Look what this does to my hair!” It was a nice moment of levity in the midst of an otherwise earnest presentation. Biographer Shirley Du Boulay noted that Tutu was "a man of many layers and contradictory tensions," one of them being that “his jocularity ran alongside a deep seriousness.” I like that. We can take things seriously, and have joy at the same time.

And along that line, in the Roman Catholic Church, to be canonized as a saint, among the list of qualifications there has to be proof of joy in the candidate during their life. I’m glad that at least the Catholic church recognizes that dourness is not a virtue.

What all of this tells us is: *Joy is ours, because it’s a fruit of the Spirit... and at the same time, joy is a choice.* Like we talked about last week, the Holy Spirit’s gift to us is to form the character of Christ in us; and at the same time, our part in receiving that gift is to say yes to it; to consent to it. So, the joy that comes from the Spirit is ours, but it’s also something to choose. Or maybe a better way to look at it is: joy is in us through the giving of the Holy Spirit, so we simply need to let it loose; let it off leash.

Therefore, because joy is something we have, and can choose to turn loose, true Christian joy is not dependent upon our feelings or on our circumstances, but

on what God has **said about us** and **what God has done for us**, and **what God has given us**. What God has **said** about us is that we are his children, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that God is on your side; you are loved, unconditionally. And joy is based on what he has **done for us** in Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. And joy is based on what he has **given** us, like unconditional love, all the blessings of life for which we give thanks. Again...

Joy is ours, and it's a choice. "Rejoice in the Lord always" isn't just a nice suggestion. It's phrased as a command, actually, as is the call to worship from psalm 100 to "make a joyful noise." These are phrased as a command, but it's a command with a smile 😊. And it's something we can choose, even if we're having a bad day, or find ourselves in one of those valleys of life for a time. We can have joy, even when life is penciled in, tenuous, difficult right now. We don't have to have all the bills paid, all our work done, or our body in perfect health. Joy comes from knowing, and trusting, that God is with us, and that we are loved unconditionally by the creator of the universe.

Joy is ours, and it's a choice.

Here are some life-giving and encouraging words from Gary Haugen, the CEO of International Justice Mission. IJM exists to eradicate human trafficking

and slavery worldwide by strengthening local communities and their systems of protection and justice, where the vulnerable are at risk. It's a non-government Christian organization. Their mission statement: "Rescue Thousands. Protect Millions. Prove that justice for the poor is possible." They go right into places where, for example, young girls have been kidnapped for sex trafficking, and, working with local authorities, rescue them.

Gary Haugen is the founder and CEO of IJM, and Gary is a joy-filled Jesus guy. I've been told that if you meet him, he's joyful. When you listen to him speak, he's joyful. And he was asked once, how can you be so joyful, with what you do and with the evil you witness almost on a daily basis? His reply: How can I *not* be joyful? If I don't have joy, I'm useless; I'm no good to anyone. Here is what he has said about this (from a journal he contributed to):

"The victims of injustice in our world do not need our spasm of passion; they need our long obedience in the same direction. *They* need our legs and lungs of endurance; and *we* need sturdy stores of joy. We cannot ache and sweat through history's long arc of justice without clutching life-giving stores of beauty, laughter, goodness, love and light; without snatching delicious naps in the cool grassy spots, and without late night fires with friends who make us flush and ache with laughter. To carelessly ditch the cool canteen of joy in the name of a severe urgency is to misunderstand the expedition and to render one's self useless in the fight against aggressive evil. The grim, sophisticated, self-serious activist finds him/herself angry and spent, and exceedingly bad company. For while it is heartless and lazy to pretend that the suffering, slaughter and waste of our world

is not real and true, it is indulgent and false to believe it is the whole truth—for it is not. To lose this faith is to lose sight of what makes evil evil and our fight worth fighting. Moreover, as wizened and weathered veterans have observed, nearly once every day the divine struggle for justice should make us laugh. For the juxtaposition of the grandness and glory of the calling with the quality of God's recruits is sure evidence of a comic heart within the Sovereign."

In other words, look who God is using to accomplish his work! That by itself ought to make us laugh.

Now here is a guy who chooses joy in the midst of hard, if not evil, circumstances. In a line of work that includes raids in places like Nigeria fighting Boko Haram who kidnap and enslave girls.

I love what he's saying: if we don't have joy, we're no good to anybody. We need to be able to laugh and have our souls restored.

Joy is ours; and it's a choice.

I'd like to turn our attention for a moment to the Nehemiah passage, where Nehemiah tells the people: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." There is an important story behind these words: the Israelites had just returned to Jerusalem after their long exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had conquered them and the majority of Israelites were exiled to a foreign land and held in captivity. Now, 70 years has passed and they are back in Jerusalem, which had been ransacked and

destroyed by the Babylonians—the entire city had been levelled to the ground.

The prophet Jeremiah describes this destruction and laments it in, well, the book of Lamentations.

And upon their return to Jerusalem, their first act of restoration is to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem so they will be protected from enemies, so they can rebuild the city inside, which included rebuilding their temple.

While they are rebuilding the wall, they are recommitting themselves to God, especially to following the Torah (their law), because they know it was their or their ancestors' complacency and self-satisfied religion that got them into that mess in the first place. As they hear the words of the Torah they weep, openly.

And as they turn their attention to the task of rebuilding, Nehemiah tells them: the time for weeping is complete; it's time now to let God's joy strengthen you for the task ahead, of rebuilding.

And it's interesting: read through the rest of chapter 9 of Nehemiah, and chapters 10 and 11, and you see the people doing three things, in this order: **first**, they celebrate the feast of booths, or tabernacles. This commemorates the wilderness wanderings after the Exodus, and how God provided for them in the

wilderness. It helped them remember who they were, where they had come from, and how God had provided for them.

Then (second) they make confession openly and honestly and *corporately*, in a national confession of sin, as a people. And they make their confession by retelling their story: here is what we did. Lord, you were faithful, we were unfaithful. You did this, but we did this. And they commit to changing their ways.

Then (third) they make a covenant, an agreement of faithfulness to God. And once they do that, then God's blessing begins to open up for them.

Btw, this sounds like something our country could use right now—open lament, and honest confession of bad religion which led to corporate wrongdoing in our treatment of indigenous peoples, and black Americans, and Asian Americans; and then agreeing to change and committing to a new future. That would provide much-needed healing for everyone.

This Nehemiah story is a remarkable story surrounding the rebuilding of Jerusalem. But what was really being rebuilt *was the people's faith*. Their trust in God. That's the real rebuilding project here: their faith. And it began with the words: *the joy of the Lord is your strength*. After a needed time of weeping and confession, he says, don't let the present mess around you get you down, and

don't let worries about the future get you down. Let's get to rebuilding! God is faithful, God will strengthen us, so... let's get to it.

And if we're in a time when we're rebuilding our life, say, after loss or tragedy or a failure of some kind; or if we're rebuilding an organization, or a community, and maybe even a country, this story is one of the most helpful biblical stories: remember who we are and where we came from; we confess our part, openly and honestly: these are our problems; we own them and we know that things need to change if we want to move forward; and then recommit ourselves to trusting in God's faithfulness—and let God's **joy** carry us forward.

Let God fill us with joy today, and with *hope* for the future. “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, God's own dear presence to cheer and to guide, strength for today (joy gives us that strength!), and bright hope for tomorrow... Great is your faithfulness.” That hymn is next in the order of worship this morning. And, that hymn is based on a passage in the book of Lamentations, by the way, right after the destruction of Jerusalem. It's a great example of rejoicing in God's faithfulness in the midst of lament and suffering.

Because it's the joy of the Lord that strengthens us, like it did the Israelites. Joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, as a fruit of the Spirit. If the Israelites tried to

have happiness based solely on their circumstances, there wouldn't be much to celebrate. Their joy, rather, was based on what *God* was doing, right then and there, and it strengthened and sustained them.

This is what Paul says in our Philippians text this morning: rejoice *in the Lord* always, pray and give thanks, and it will sustain you with God's peace.

Each of us needs to find what brings us joy, or creates joy for ourselves and others. It might be simply going for a walk to get your body to tell your heart and mind to rejoice. Or maybe it's listening to good music or singing. Or maybe it's some kind of artistic expression like knitting or drawing. Or maybe it's laughing at something humorous; as they saying goes, "laughing is like inner jogging"—it's exercise for our soul. Whatever it is, it helps if it's something that engages your whole self—body, mind and emotions—in rejoicing and keeping you in the present.

For me, I like to hear about and read about positive ecological changes and efforts that are helping us partner with God in the renewal of the earth, which is sorely needed at this time. For example, I recently read that local farmers markets not only survived the pandemic, but they are thriving and growing. A couple decades ago, there were fewer than 2,000 open farmers markets in the

U.S. Today, there are more than 8,600 markets currently registered in the USDA Farmers Market Directory. The great part about that, of course, is that people are eating healthier foods and local farmers and artists and artisans are being supported. But a great side-effect is that farmers markets are probably the cheeriest place to shop. There is almost always live music playing, food to sample, and a diverse crowd to watch. Farmers markets create community and help communities thrive. Find a local market and soak it in for a few moments of joy.

Similarly, surveys revealed that 18 million Americans started gardens at their homes during and after the pandemic. There was a natural and reflexive desire, and need, to return to a connection with the earth, which is a very human need. Which is leading many people to a renewed spirituality and connection with God, their Creator.

All of this makes me happy. And it shows that there are positive changes being made, ecologically. And there are hundreds more stories like this.

What is it for you? If all else fails and we don't know what to do to choose joy, we can always make a gratitude list. Even if, on a hard day, we can only muster a couple of things to put on the list. Doing this teaches us to see God at

work in our lives, and it helps us to pay attention to the goodness and abundance around us. And as a result we can sing with confidence the great hymn that is next in our worship, Great is Thy Faithfulness.