

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

Nehemiah 8:9-10

Philippians 4:4-7

In this Pentecost season, we are reflecting on the Fruit of the Spirit. Today, we are looking at the second fruit on the list: joy. Our first reading is a well-known and beloved passage from Philippians 4:4-7:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to everyone. The Lord is near. 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.”

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 odd, or even incongruous to talk about joy right now, with everything going on in our 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 New Testament was written, it was written to Christians who were experiencing the beginnings of intense and violent persecutions. So, when the apostle Paul says in 1Thessalonians 5:16-18, “*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 in comfortable suburbia, but to people who were under threat of being unjustly accused of crimes and jailed and publicly tortured for no reason except that the Roman empire felt threatened by them. Well, Caesar was threatened by them because they claimed *Jesus Christ* as Lord and not Caesar as Lord.

And for a very contemporary example of rejoicing in any and every circumstance... Pastor Danny Givens, an African American pastor in Minneapolis, recently shared a heartfelt message directed at the governor of Minnesota

following a memorial service for George Floyd. Rev. Givens wanted the governor to “understand that grief, anger, and black joy are hard to separate.” He shared that at funerals of young people slain by the police, expressions of black joy are common. He said, “This is not ‘joy’ in the ordinary sense of the word. This is the communal performance of resistance and resilience through dancing and rhythmic movement. Funeral car doors fly open, music is thumping, and the community dances its defiance of death, and the society that produces it. We are angry, we are grieving, we are performing black joy as a sign of our determination to survive.”

Here is a great example of how we can learn from black Americans’ experience. Joy, and rejoicing in the Lord, takes on a new and different meaning in that context and in their experience.

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. I think our society is on the brink of gaining traction on needed conversations and actions. But it’s a bumpy ride right now, and we are 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 remember, we're in the disillusionment phase of a collective trauma response with this pandemic, and when you add the intensity of the racial issues that are before us, and the need for learning and healing and reconciliation and justice, we all need to give ourselves, and others, permission to feel what we, and they, are feeling.

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 the 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 in Psalm 100 (our call to worship this morning): "Make a joyful noise to the Lord."

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.

Mother Teresa once said that if you want to proclaim Christ to your non-Christian friends and family, do it by showing forth your joyfulness; show that your faith in Christ brings joy and gladness to your life. 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 in accomplishing salvation. And joy is based on what he has **given** us, through his Spirit, 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 a nice suggestion. It's phrased as a command, 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.

John Trent story (books on marriage and parenting, often with Gary Smalley): grew up with twin brother, and 2 other older brothers. Their father abandoned the family when they were little, so mom raised them by herself, and she worked a full-time job to support herself and her young boys. And John Trent says he and his brothers were hell on wheels; 4 rambunctious boys! They were not easy to raise. But John Trent says that most days, when his mom came home from work, she greeted them with a smile, hugs, and something positive to say to them.

When he was grown and out of the house, he asked her about it: "How did you do it?? Your life was so hard for you." She told him that every day on her way home from work she would pull the car over and park a few blocks from home, and for 10 minutes she would pray, using Proverbs 15:30 as the basis of her prayer: "*Brightness of eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news refreshes*

the body.” So she tried to form the habit of greeting her boys with “bright eyes” and something positive to say to them, even if she was tired and had a rotten day at work.

“Brightness of eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news refreshes the body.” Here was a woman who chose joy in the midst of tough circumstances—or, rather, she drew from the well of joy that was already there within her by the Spirit; she just needed some time to access it by the side of the road before she arrived home. John Trent says there were bad days and failures, when she was grumpy and yelled at her boys (who of us haven’t done that as parents?!?), and there were days when they were awful to her. But her perseverance in choosing joy over time resulted in her boys being blessed, and in her having a steady store of joy within her.

Joy is ours; and it’s a choice.

I’d like to turn our attention for a moment to the Nehemiah passage (“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. So, 70 years has passed and

now 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 the 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 complacency and violation of God's will that got them into the mess of destruction and exile in the first place. As they hear the words of the Torah they weep, openly. They feel *their* guilt, and they understand the guilt of their ancestors. They see the rubble around them that they know they were partly responsible for—they and their ancestors.

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 confess their sin 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. And they were specific about what they did in their wrongdoing: 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 they sign on the dotted line. 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 corporate wrongdoing in our treatment of black Americans; and then agreeing to change and committing to a new future...

This Nehemiah story a remarkable story surrounding the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. But what was really 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 time of weeping and confession, he says, don't let the present mess around you get you down, or worries about the future get you down. It's time to rebuild! 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 after addiction; or if we're rebuilding a family, or rebuilding an organization, and maybe even a country, this story is one of the most helpful biblical stories: remember who we are and where we came from; 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. 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. Not our own attempts at happiness, but the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, as a fruit of the Spirit. If the Israelites tried to have happiness based on their circumstances, there wouldn’t be much to celebrate. And the same could be said of us in our circumstances. Their joy, rather, was based on what *God* was doing, right then and there, and it strengthened and sustained them. And, the same can be true for us, as we move forward.

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

Now, it’s the “always” part that gets me. Like, “Be joyful *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” We might ask, how I can I rejoice when things look like such a mess right now and there is so much pain? How can I give thanks when covid19 is still infecting people and I can’t get out and do everything I want to? I’ll tell you

how... or why. Because God is faithful, we are loved unconditionally, and, things are changing for the better.

Heidi said after one of her trips to Rwanda: African people dance, all the time, in any circumstance. They dance when they're happy; they dance when they're sad; they dance when they feel exuberant; they dance when they feel depressed; they dance when babies are born; they dance when they are grieving; they dance when they're hungry and don't have enough to eat; they dance when they've had a good meal. It's their way to choose joy, because it's one way that they can live in the present moment, and tell their bodies that God is with them, and there is still much to be grateful for, even in the midst of difficulty and challenging circumstances. Even in post-genocide Rwanda. It's a daily, evening ritual, to dance.

Maybe dancing every evening isn't your thing—or it isn't even possible for it to **be** your thing! However, maybe it's 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 (we can't sing corporately right now but we can sing at home); or maybe it's some kind of artistic expression like knitting or drawing, or maybe it's laughing at something humorous (“laughing is like inner jogging” —exercise for our soul).

Whatever it is, it helps if it's something that engages your whole self—body, soul and spirit; mind and emotions—in rejoicing and keeping you in the present.

And, we can make a gratitude list, and on that list include the hard and challenging things, and learn to thank God for them too. Because learning to give thanks in *all* circumstances, and not just the happy ones, teaches us to see God at work in every aspect of our lives, and it helps us to grow in our faith, and as a result we can sing with confidence the great hymn that is next in our worship, Great is Thy Faithfulness.

Before singing that, let me pray for us: Faithful God, we thank you. We thank you for all the bright and beautiful things: for flowers and trees, the laughter of children, and the warm sunshine that brightens our day. And we also thank you for the difficult things: for a pandemic that gets us out of our routines and teaches us new ways to live and learn; we thank you for new and needed conversations about racial justice and reconciliation, and actions that can gain traction to build a new future, even amidst the turmoil of the present days. As we study the fruit of the Spirit this summer, may this fruit grow not only in our individual lives, but in our communities, and in our society. For the sake of Christ and his Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.