

“The Joy of ... Loving”

Isaiah 12:1-6 • Romans 12:1-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 11, 2016

This morning I want to talk again about the meaning of Advent and why it's so important for us. As we talked about last week, Advent is a time of preparing ourselves for the real meaning of Christmas. It's a time of waiting, a time of thinking about why the birth of Jesus is such a big deal. Of course it's a big deal because we're talking about the God who created the whole universe being born as a human baby and in a barn no less. That's how much God loves you. He was willing to be humiliated, be rejected, suffer and die on a cross for you.

Each week during Advent we light a new candle on the Advent Wreath as a way of reminding us to keep our priorities straight this time of year. Each candle represents the focus for the week. Last week we looked at the first two candles, the candle of hope and the candle of peace. Real hope, remember, is more than wishing. Because of Christ's resurrection, Christian hope comes with a guarantee. That hope can lead to real peace. You'll recall that peace is more than just the absence of violence. True peace is Christ living His life in us. We can know that peace by keeping our minds focused on Jesus, seeking God's Kingdom first, and working to be agents of peace and reconciliation.

This morning I want to talk about joy and love. Like hope and peace, I think these two are very closely tied together. Joy is the result of love and love is fueled by joy. So many people are trying unsuccessfully to find joy that joy has become big business. I did a little research and found that there are over 17,000 books with the word "joy" in the title. You probably have *The Joy of Cooking*. Don't get me wrong. It's a great cookbook. But I can't say that it's been a source of enduring joy. How about *The Joy of Keeping Farm Animals*, or *The Joy of Juicing*. One you may want to add to your Christmas wish list is a book about the joys of math. No?

There are lots of self-help books about how to find or create your own joy. The fact that

there are so many of them hints that maybe it's not possible to find joy simply by trying harder. So the question for us today is "where does true joy come from?" George Burns once said, "Happiness is having a large, loving, close-knit, caring family...in another city." Aristotle claimed that "happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." In America we consider the pursuit of happiness to be an inalienable right and there are many in our society today who believe that if it feels good then it's good.

We confuse joy with happiness. Happiness is the product of our circumstances. If things are going well, we may be happy. We say, "If I could just get that new car or that new job, then I'd be happy." But that kind of happiness is fleeting. It won't last. Joy, on the other hand, is not something we create ourselves. Joy is our response to God's activity in our lives and in the world. Joy is actually the result of love – God's love. Joy comes from God's salvation. Isaiah 12 contains a couple of prophecies that are also songs of praise. Isaiah is filled with joy because of God's salvation that will come through Jesus. Verse 3 says, "With *joy* you will draw water from the wells of salvation." And in verse 6 he says, "Shout, and sing for joy...for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Now as we turn our attention to the twelfth chapter of Romans I want to give you the secret to real joy. You might want to write this down because it will save you a lot of money on self-help books about making joy. Ready? The secret to joy is JOY. J-O-Y. That stands for Jesus, Others, and You. When you put your priorities in this order you unlock the secret to joy regardless of your happiness. Let's look at each of these.

The first thing I want us to understand about joy is that it's the result of being loved by Jesus. When His undeserved grace and forgiveness are finally able to penetrate through the thick layers of self-doubt that we create, we

begin to feel the surge of joy. Of course this is not easy for us. We find it difficult to let Christ love us and change us. For some of us, it's hard to imagine that God could possibly love us in spite of all the things we've done wrong.

Or we try to earn God's favor. We feel like if we can just *do* the right things or at least *think* the right thoughts, then we deserve God's favor. But when we think that way we completely miss the meaning of grace. The last thing we want from God is what we deserve. That's where grace comes in. Grace is unmerited favor. In other words, grace means we get something we don't deserve at all – namely salvation.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul tells us to make Jesus the number one priority in our lives. That's hard. It's hard because it means that whatever we've made most important has to move. It's usually ourselves. You have to get off the throne of your life and let Jesus take His rightful place. Paul writes, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." How do we do that? One of the ways is to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Every moment of every day is an opportunity to be in the presence of Christ by using your mind.

So if the first key to unlocking joy in your life is Jesus, the second key is "others." Verse 3 says, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." Joy is the result of love and love is fueled by joy. Real love is not a feeling or an emotion. Real love is an act of the will. What Jesus demonstrated for us is that true love involves sacrifice. To love someone you must put that person's needs and interests ahead of your own. That's how it

works in marriage and in friendship and in the church. Paul uses the analogy of a body with all the different parts working together. Then in verses 6-8 he mentions several gifts that God gives us. Notice that each of these gifts is given to you for the benefit of others – prophecy, serving, teaching, preaching, giving, leading, and acts of mercy. God has given each one of you a particular set of gifts and the reason He gave them to you is for you to use them for other people. Verse 6 says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...*with cheerfulness*." As you think about the gifts God has given you – time, skills, knowledge, money – recognize that He expects you to use them for His Kingdom first.

That brings us to *you*. In Luke 6 Jesus said, "forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

If you love Jesus enough to put Him first in your life, and love other people enough to put serving them second, you will find that you have more joy by being in third place than you would have by trying to take care of yourself first. That's because love and joy can't be bought and it can't be made. The irony is that the more you try to make yourself love or have joy, the less of each you will have because you will be focused on what you don't have. But the more you sacrificially love and give, the more love and joy you will experience.

Amen.