

The Ripe Stuff sermon series  
#9 – Joy; Psalm 30:1-5  
March 3, 2019  
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Have you heard of Marie Kondo? She wrote a nifty little book called The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up and now stars in a Netflix series called “Tidying Up.” Kondo is an organizing consultant who goes into people’s homes and helps them get their lives in order. She’s a hoarder’s worst nightmare! On the TV show, one of her tricks is to have a person put all their clothes in one big pile and then, one by one, go through each piece and ask themselves, “Does this spark joy?” If it does, it stays. If it doesn’t, the person thanks the piece of clothing and puts it in a pile to be given away.

Leigh recently binge-watched the entire series and started Marie Kondoing our house. I was afraid to stand too still because I wasn’t sure which pile I would end up in. Some days I spark joy, but then there are those other days... I tried watching the show, but in the second episode, Kondo talked a man into getting rid of most of his baseball card collection. That’s when I learned that Marie Kondo is actually the devil. There are lines you simply do not cross, people.

“Does this spark joy?” What a fascinating question, isn’t it? I wonder what we would keep and toss out in our lives if we let joy be the determining factor. As we conclude our sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit, we’re going to look at the fruit that may seem easiest to cultivate, but which usually gets confused with other feelings and emotions. I saved joy for last because I thought we needed to end this series on a high note before we move into Lent next week. For the record, Lent does NOT spark joy for me.

The Bible talks a LOT about joy. It’s mentioned 52 times in the Psalms alone. Paul refers to joy 21 times in the course of his letters. One of the most well-known is in Philippians when he says, “Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say, rejoice!” This is not a request; it’s a command! And Jesus makes his purpose clear when he says in John’s gospel, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” So, joy is fundamental to living the Christian life. One commentator said, “It’s a contradiction to God’s purpose to not be joyful.” Another person called a life without joy, “practical atheism.” That’s when you proclaim Jesus Christ with our lips, but don’t live our joy with our lives. And we ALL know people like that, present company excluded.

So, what is joy? The dictionary definition says it is a “feeling of great pleasure or happiness.” I completely disagree, because both of those words have worldly connotations that are antithetical to the biblical meaning of joy. Pleasure is a fleeting feeling, happiness is a fickle emotion, but joy is a disposition, a worldview we choose to take. In her book Outlaw Christian, author Jacqueline Bussie eloquently wrote, “Joy is when your morning coffee smells like fragrant possibility released from its husk. Joy is the feeling that the present moment is a tree you want to climb. Joy means loving others for the love they can give you rather than the love you want. Joy is gratitude so overflowing, it comes out the corner of your eyes.”

That’s different than pleasure and happiness. One of their main characteristics is that they are self-serving. After all, one of the founding principles of our nation is the individual’s right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And since then, we’ve been pursuing that with a vengeance in ways that have contributed to the socio-economic divide that exists in this country. We’ve been sold a fake bill of goods that pleasure and happiness equal joy. But they don’t. We

feel pleasure when we get what we want, but we feel joy when others get what they need. Pleasure and happiness are externally motivated, but joy comes from within.

One author contrasts biblical joy with manufactured desire. He wrote that our culture instills in us desires that we think give our lives meaning. For example, we're sold on the fact that more and bigger is better. Bigger houses. Faster computers. More stuff. But more of something doesn't mean better. Comedian Dennis Miller once joked, "I saw where K-Mart was having a 2-for-1 sale on their suits. Hey, folks, two of junk is still junk." It is, but then you have TWO of them! That's always better than one, right?

As long as we buy into the myth that our joy is contingent upon what and how much we own, we'll always be in pursuit of joy but never arrive. It's called the principle of joy endlessly deferred. We know we'll be happy once we get that one thing that we're missing. But we get it, and then realize there's a bigger and better thing that will really make us happy. So, we pursue that. And we forget that the person who dies with the most toys...still dies.

In the pursuit of all the things the world tells us are important – possessions, productivity, reputation – we miss the true joy that God offers us each and every day, the joy that comes from within but is always other-directed. The other day, Debbie, our childcare center director, was in my office asking a question and told me it was Crazy Sock Day at the center. I happened to mention I had on my Star Wars socks and she said, "You should come and join us!" Immediately, I started thinking of all the things I had to do to be productive, so I began to decline, but she said, "It will only take a minute. And it will be fun!" This is a church, we're not allowed to have fun!

So, I followed her to the center and join a class of two- and three-year-old kids who all had on crazy socks. We took our shoes off and sat on the floor and we all put our feet in the middle so Debbie could take a picture. One little girl sat on my lap and we wiggled our toes and bounced our feet up and down. Then Debbie said, "Would you like to read them a book?" Hmm. Go back to work or read a book to a group of preschoolers? The book was "The Foot Book" by Dr. Seuss. I don't care how bad a day you are having, nothing will bring you joy like reading a Dr. Seuss book to a group of little ones. We giggled and made funny voices and rolled around on the floor – the kids did some of that, too – and at the end all the kids gave me hugs. And to think, I would have missed that for the pleasure of crossing a few emails off my to-do list.

Erin Wathen writes, "Joy often comes spontaneously and without planning or manipulation on our part, which is ironic, because we wind up spending much of our time and resources trying to arrange for joy to visit us." The joy God offers us, the joy Jesus wants for us, has absolutely nothing to do with what you buy, what you own, where you live, what you drive, or what other people think about you. If those were factors in our joy, it would change faster than February weather in Lexington. Those things may affect our happiness, but they can't touch our joy, because our joy comes from the knowledge that we are loved by the God who created the universe and coffee and crazy socks. We talked in Sermon Talkback about joy being an undercurrent that runs within us, bubbling up to the surface and bursting forth like a geyser when a friend calls unexpectedly to say "Hello" or a child emerges from the baptismal waters. Joy is the spontaneous response to God's goodness all around us.

I used to work with a pastor named Nelson who lived out this God-given joy. His favorite saying was, "It's a great day to be alive!" He said that every day. Even on his bad days. I would get frustrated with him because not every day was a great day to be alive, but it was to him. If it was raining outside, he would say, "Well, we'll just make our own sunshine!" You couldn't help but feel joy around Nelson because he radiated it. True joy is always other-directed.

And yet, in the challenges of life, it can feel totally absent, or at least conditional. Brene Brown writes about what she calls “foreboding joy,” the fear that if we let ourselves experience joy, we’ll get blindsided by disaster or disappointment. Saturday Night Live used to have a character called Debbie Downer who was the living embodiment of foreboding joy. Someone would say, “I’m getting a puppy!” and Debbie would say, “It’ll probably die within 10 years.” Brown says when we do this, we turn every opportunity to feel joy into a test-drive for despair and we end up squandering our joy.

Our difficult times feel like the hardest times to have joy, and yet it is when joy is most needed and most present. Listen to the prophet Habbakuk express this unquenchable joy: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.” I hate it when my fig tree doesn’t blossom. And yet, I have joy.

That’s what separates us as followers of Christ. We know that joy can be found in the midst of difficult circumstances, not outside of them. Some think joy can only be experienced by escaping the world’s cares and sorrows, and yet true joy can be experienced in the midst of them. Some of the greatest joy I’ve experienced has been at funerals where we have laughed and cried and told stories about a life well-lived. Henri Nouwen, the spiritual writer who gave up his professorship to work at a home for severely mentally disabled people, wrote, “My own life is this community has been immensely joyful, even though I have never suffered so much, cried so much, or anguished so much as at Daybreak.” Romans 8 says, “God is at work in all things to bring about good.” Joy is not the absence of something undesirable. It is the peace and presence of God with us at all times, working to bring good out of even the worst situations.

I was diagnosed with MS while I was in seminary and had to spend several days in the hospital for tests. It was not a time in my life that sparked joy. One of those days was a Sunday, so I had to miss church and youth group. That evening, I got a call from the nurse’s station to go down to the cafeteria. Cheryl, one of our youth sponsors, decided we should have our youth group meeting at the hospital. I sat there in my hospital gown in that sterile hospital cafeteria, eating potato chips and playing board games and laughing with my favorite people in the world. In the midst of those dark circumstances, it was a time so overflowing with joy that it came out the corner of my eyes.

Jesus does not promise us an easy life. But what he does promise us is he is with us in the midst of it, gently reminding us of God’s promises and God’s desire for us to be joyous. In that regard, joy is a choice we make each and every day. Is the glass half-full or half-empty? Does the day hold potential problems or potential opportunities? Is it a great day to be alive, or is it just another day? If we leave it up to feelings and emotions, who knows? Happiness and pleasure are conditional, they exist because of something. But joy exists in spite of everything. Theologian Karl Barth said that, in the face of human suffering, the joy of a Christians stands out as a “defiant nevertheless!” That is my prayer for us. May our lives be a “defiant nevertheless” to all the challenges and obstacles in our path, and may every day be a great day to be alive, thanks be to God.