

19.11.03 sermon

Sing to the Lord a new song;
praise God with words and silence.
Praise God through all your actions;
praise God in sorrow and in joy.
Praise God with music and dancing,
with bodies moving in delight.
Let the wise sing out in their freedom;
let the whole earth echo their song.
Let all God's creatures be peaceful
and walk in the path of true life.

Stephen Mitchell translation of Psalm 149

Luke 6:20-31

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

`Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

`Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

`Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

`Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

`But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

`Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

`Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

`Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

SERMON:

We are made for joy.

That's how Joel introduced our sharing time last week.

That statement has been with me, like a rough spot on a tooth, where the tongue keeps touching, exploring, moving over, again and again.

Somehow it felt right for this Sunday.

We are made for joy.

This Sunday, where we remember those who have died.

This Sunday, where we remember Christ's life and death through the celebration of communion.

This Sunday, where our readings are about the blessed.

Somehow 'we are made for joy' seems just right for today.

Just right, because Joy and suffering are inseparable. They're linked, somehow. And those who are blessed intuitively know that, I think.

Fredrich Buechner says that we need to be reminded that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is man-made—a happy home, a happy

relationship with our friends and within our jobs. We work for these things. But we never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that they are not man-made and that we are never really responsible for them. They come when they come (as gifts from God). They are always sudden and quick and unrepeatable... Joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes. Yes, joy can come at any time - Even nailed to a tree.¹

Who is blessed? Those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who weep, right here and now.

I've come to love the word blessed. I love it because of its expansiveness. Blessed literally means to extend - to make long and large. To be blessed is for God to make long and large her benefits.²

Blessed ones are large, open, expansive. Jesus says here to rejoice in that day - that day when others exclude you, revile you. Don't hate, no, rejoice! Leap for joy! That requires opening up long and large to receive God's benefits.

That sounds like just too much of a stretch for me most of the time.

Why? Because lots of times, suffering makes no sense. Suffering knocks us off balance. It makes us small and incapable of seeing God's wide love. Suffering causes us to hunch in our shoulders and protect our hearts. When we're overwhelmed by suffering we lose sight of the meaning of life and love, we lose sight of the blessings Christ has to offer to us when we are poor, hungry, weeping.

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/10/28/touched-with-joy>

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm>

Our scripture today reminds us that nothing here lasts forever. Blessed are those who are down and out - sick, tired, hungry, weeping. And woe - woe meaning watch out, pay attention, you who have it all - because it's not going to last. There are hidden promises here. Blessings that are long and large.

Jesus calls us blessed when we are at our weakest. Jesus tells us, beyond our understanding and our hope, that God's long, large grace is here for us, in our darkest grief. Jesus invites us to see the promise in the places that appear dead and barren - the cocoon, the bulb, the snows of winter that are coming our way. No, that's not the end of the story! He tells us. You were made for joy. "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

Last week, the Tree of Life synagogue, in Pittsburgh, remembered the pain of last year's invasion and shooting. On Sunday afternoon, they met outside the building, at the fence that surrounds the property. The fence was covered with artwork - signs of blessing, signs of hope, signs of resilience and possibility. Few have been back inside the building. For most, it's still just too painful. They continue the hard work of healing and moving through their grief, while also holding a vision for what lies ahead. They are unsure if the building will remain, but they are clear that Tree of Life will again worship in that space. They want a space for worship and a place to remember - to remember the love that has blessed them. For they name how they have been blessed - blessed by the outpouring of love from around the globe. Blessed with origami cranes, quilts and prayer shawls... Last week they displayed artwork sent from students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fl., where 17 people were killed in a shooting there. During their outside service last week, Rabbi Yossi Rosenblum spoke about the need for hope. "Goodness and kindness will ultimately prevail" he said.³

³ <https://time.com/5710735/tree-of-life-one-year-rebuild/>

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

To be blessed is to experience the large, wide depth of God's grace.

Soren Kirkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian said: " It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice." Religious courage is to believe that God is wound up in this whole fraught business of life. Grief and hope coexist. Anger and happiness coexist. Fear and Joy coexist.⁴

Blessedness, sorrow, joy - somehow they are intertwined.

The song, *In the bulb there is a flower*, was written by Natalie Sleeth as she was pondering the death of a friend, pondering the seeming opposites of spring and winter, holding the paradoxes of life and death, death and resurrection. A T. S. Eliot phrase, "In our end is our beginning" came to her. It was out of these seemingly contradictory pairs that she composed that song.

So this Sunday we sing together, we light candles remembering those who have gone before us, holding the joy and grief of our separateness. And after the lighting of candles today, where we hold life and death, death and resurrection together, we will move into communion. This ritual of remembering that invites us to live into the joy that Jesus came to give us.

Somehow, some way, we are made for joy. Joy that blesses us. Joy that holds the beauty and the struggle of life.

⁴ M. Florer-Bixler, Raleigh Mennonite Church sermon, online 19.10.27

Before heading off to the garden, Jesus told his closest friends, I have come that you may have joy, and that your joy may be complete.

Joy and blessings aren't something we earn, something we work hard for. Joy and blessings are the gifts that unexpectedly greet us when God's love and grace open us to see - to imagine the bulb in the flower.

Yes, we are made for joy.

Confession: (Before we move into communion)

Repentance and confession, commitment and recommitment are part of the Christian process of becoming.

Jesus said, 'I have come that you may have joy, and that your joy may be complete'....that your joy may be complete.

We live in an incomplete world, we are incomplete people. We are poor in so many ways - lacking the ability to see the flower in the dry, dusty, lifeless looking bulb.

And so we take time to name those places of lack - those places where we have been small and cramped in our love for one another.

We name those places of fear, that keep us behind locked doors.

We name those places of hunger for relationships that are deeper than a screen.

We come, incomplete, before Christ, who holds all with us.

In our silence, we name our incompleteness.

We confess our sinfulness, those places that lack God's vision, and we recommit our lives to Christ. Join me in reading #793 in the hymnal.

Communion:

You are made for joy

I've come that you may have joy, and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus takes the broken body, the broken bread and in blessing it he blesses us. Reminding us that it's out of the brokenness of the earth that the bulb blooms. Being broken open is part of the process of death becoming new life.

Jesus came so that his joy - this holding together of suffering and blessedness - the blessedness of knowing God's expansive grace and love even when nailed to the cross. Jesus came and broke bread to help us remember that we are made for joy.