

## **Fruit of the Spirit – Joy**

Friday, I presided over a funeral at Grace for Phyllis Olson...some of you may have known her. Phyllis was a joyful person. For her service she picked the familiar Ecclesiastes passage – for everything there is a season.

But that made me think about how Ecclesiastes is a pretty good book in general for thinking about joy.

On the surface that at first seems odd. Mostly Ecclesiastes seems to be about the futility of all our striving...everything we chase after in life turns out to be all vanity and chasing after the wind. The author struggles to find any meaning in life at all.

But then he says this: I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

And at the end of the book, he decides the most important thing is to be faithful to the God who has given us this life to enjoy.

Be happy, enjoy life, enjoy the people around you, eat and drink and take pleasure in your work. And be faithful to God.

Really, that's what I'd say living with joy is.

Real joy arises, not out of the things we accomplish or the things that happen to us. Real joy is not really dependent on how life is going at a particular moment. Real joy comes from recognizing the gifts God has given us...most importantly the gift of Jesus, God with us.

And while this is more Ecclesiastes than New Testament, I think real joy can only be experienced in the moment.

Real joy is what happens when our big picture of life might even be pretty gloomy. But then, in a particular moment we find something to be joyful about. In that moment, we feel happy, or we're enjoying time with people we love, or we're enjoying a good meal with people, or we're working on something particularly satisfying.

Perhaps the two biggest enemies of joy are regret and worry. As the saying goes, regret means you're living in the past. Worry means you're living in the future. Joy can only be experienced in the moment.

So, a couple examples from probably one of the most joyful times of my life.

Most of you will remember when our son was very sick. He got sick in Chicago and was in the hospital for 7 weeks there, came home for a couple weeks and spent another month in the hospital, first at St. E's and then was transferred to UNMC.

While he was at Northwestern in Chicago, mostly it was me who stayed there. I could do a lot of my work from there and Daryl couldn't. He would come to Chicago on the weekends so I could come home for worship services.

So for most of that time I was by myself with Sam, who mostly slept. Except for evenings when Erica would come. And even in the midst of all the anxiety of that, there was joy in spending that much time with her and having the support of her and her husband.

Sam was admitted on December 7. That Christmas was like none other in our lives, but I did find some joy in coming back and leading Christmas Eve services here. I was reminded of the real source of our joy, and the gift I've been given in this call with you all.

Then I flew back to Chicago and Daryl, Erica and I were together Christmas night. We ate a fabulous meal at the Albert, a restaurant next to our hotel by the hospital. (Screen shot of the Albert.). Our Christmas dinner was extremely different from our usual. But we did experience some joy.

There was actually considerable joy in that Christmas, so long as I took it moment by moment. And the joy I experienced came from the very things the author of Ecclesiastes laid out – good food, time with people you love, finding joy in your work, being faithful to God.

But on Christmas Eve, I was especially able to celebrate God's faithfulness to us. I was reminded that God came to us as a human being, to walk with us in those times when joy is so very hard to find.

In one of Jesus' teachings, he said "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;

Joy is probably the fruit that most reminds us that the fruit of the spirit isn't something we are very good at conjuring up on our own. It's our connection to that vine...through the Holy Spirit...that enables us to live joyfully, no matter what is going on.

Living joyfully is what happens when we live in the moment. The popular term now is mindfulness. But it's not something we do very well on our own. Regret and anxiety can easily take hold of us. We can't force joy.

But what we can do is nurture that connection to the source of joy. Prayer, meditation, worship, Bible reading, spending time in nature...in God's creation. All of those can help us stay connected to our source of joy.

Meditation in particular is the practice of repeatedly letting go of the thoughts that intrude...thoughts which are often either regrets or anxieties.

Share –

Close with meditation on joy...vision of angels and shepherds. Or a word that captures the joy you shared. Thoughts will intrude...some mundane. Some, however will be regret or anxiety. Imagine sending those thoughts up to God and come back to your word or image