

“REJOICE!”
Philippians 4:4-7

Keeping The Joy Alive Series
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There is a story I've told several times before, which some of you may know, about the man who went one Sunday to a worship service at a fairly typical Lutheran church. He sat up near the front and when the pastor began to preach, and when she made a strong point, this man jumped up in his pew and shouted, "Praise the Lord, pastor, Praise the Lord!"

Well as you can imagine, this outburst caused the pastor to lose her place in her sermon and the congregation was taken completely off guard. They had never had something like this happen before in their services. After a few short moments the pastor regained her composure and continued delivering her sermon. After a couple minutes when she again emphasized an important point this man again jumped up and shouted, "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!"

This same thing happened a couple more times and each time the pastor got all flustered, and the mumbling and fidgeting in the congregation got worse. In the back of the church a couple of the ushers were whispering together trying to figure out what they should do about this situation. They finally decided that one of them needed to quietly go up and talk to this man.

So the one usher trying to be discreet, crept down the aisle and slid into the pew next to this man. Just then the man jumped up again and shouted, "Praise the Lord!" The usher then slid over next to him, put his hand on his arm and said, "I'm sorry sir but in this church we don't praise the Lord."

As humorous as this story may be there is also a lot of truth in it. In the area of celebrating God's love and truly rejoicing in God's gifts we have often been less than enthusiastic. It has often been difficult for those of us with Scandinavian and German backgrounds to let out our feelings at all, more or less celebrate and radiate the joy of living for Christ.

There was a time of course in the history of the church when people thought that Christianity was supposed to be serious, that it was wrong to smile and be happy in church. It sometimes was even thought that if a person didn't leave worship feeling conviction and guilt, that then they had not really worshipped. We can surely admit that some worship and liturgy could better be described as lethargy because it is sometimes more like a funeral dirge than filled with joy.

My father told the true story of the pastor back in the late 1800's who served two churches on opposite sides of a lake. Following the first service at one church he would get in his horse and buggy for a fairly lengthy ride around the lake for the worship service at the other church. In the winter, however, when the lake was frozen over, he discovered that it was quicker with all the snow if he would put on his skates and skate across the lake to the church on the other side.

The church leaders however had a problem because it was considered a sin to do anything recreational, like skating, on Sunday. Therefore the church deacons had a meeting with the pastor to discuss this issue. They went round and round until finally one of the deacons said he had a solution. He asked the pastor, “Do you enjoy skating to the other church?” And when the pastor answered, “No, I don’t!”, then they said it was all right. As long as he didn’t have any fun on Sunday, and didn’t enjoy the day too much, then it was all right for him to skate.

Now the problem with this kind of piety and how it has affected us and the church through the years is that it is really not Biblical. The Bible is literally filled with examples of worship that is filled with joy/celebration. The Psalmist says in Psalm 100 that we are to “*make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*”

And Psalm 150 says, “*Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clanging cymbals! Let everything that breaths praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*”

And the Apostle Paul says in our Scripture passage for today from Philippians 4:4-5, “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known 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.*”

In the case of Jesus I think it is important to note that he began his ministry and performed his first miracle at a wedding feast, at a party, at an event filled with laughter and celebration. I firmly believe that Jesus had a sense of humor—that he loved to laugh and have fun. In fact, someone said to me one time, “Nathan, if you ever think that God doesn’t have a sense of humor just look at yourself in the mirror.” That definitely is pretty funny.

One of the most beautiful pictures of God, and of heaven, is found in Luke 15 where Jesus says that “*there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*” It is the picture of God rejoicing and celebrating when people like us, his church, bring Christ’s life-changing love to others.

The Bible is literally filled with messages of celebration, praise and thankfulness because we have a God who truly loves and cares about us; a God who came to us as a little baby in the manger of Christmas; a God who gave us his only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins and to rise again so we might have forgiveness, a joyful life now and everlasting life when die.

That’s why we can celebrate, my friends! Jesus is born in Bethlehem. His cross is empty! His tomb is empty! Jesus is with each day through his Holy Spirit and has promised to never leave us or forsake us. This is why we call his message the “good news.” It is this good news of Jesus that we should sing and shout about, that should fill our worship and life together each week.

This joy and celebration, of course, does not mean that we are happy all the time. It doesn't mean that bad things won't happen to us. It doesn't mean we should rejoice in pain or tragedy. It is not some kind of a phony religiosity, as I have seen, where some say we should smile and never cry. Joy and celebration are much deeper than just being happy all the time.

This past Sunday Kim and I shared in a joyous event as our oldest son, Zachary, began his new ministry as the Lead Pastor at Rejoice Church in Northfield, MN. It was definitely a morning filled with joy as we met many people in this congregation and as we heard Zachary preach his first message in this new church and calling.

Zachary's message focused on Jesus' parable in Matthew 7 about the wise person who builds their house on the rock, and the foolish person who builds their house on the sand. The one with their house on the rock stands firm and weathers the storms of life, while the one who builds on the sand falls flat.

The truth in this passage is that if you build your life on the rock of Jesus you will find joy and peace. Oh, your storms will still be great, if not even more challenging than some others. Yet on the rock of Jesus, even in our sadness and pain, there is joy. We have that confidence assurance that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us.

Zachary also let his new congregation know that his priority and focus for Rejoice is to continue to build this church on three things: on Jesus and Jesus alone; on Jesus' word, teaching and truth; and on the power of the Holy Spirit. A church centered on these three truths is a church that is alive and is a church filled with joy.

Rejoice Church's worship features about 20-30 minutes of worship and praise led by a worship band, followed by a 30-minute teaching message. It is different from what we may be used to. The power of it, however, is that the average age at Rejoice is very young—lots of young people, young couples and families, and kids. Very different from our aging traditional churches.

As you at Messiah experienced this morning our worship now has a Praise & Worship time led by Charis—and a new worship band of volunteers is practicing with her this Thursday at 5 P.M. It is a time to allow the Holy Spirit to use the music and singing, words from Scripture, prayer and meditation to fill us with Jesus and his joy.

These songs are taken directly from the Bible, they elicit a whole gamut of feelings from confession, to lament, to love for God, to tears of compassion, to joy and praise. Let us each Sunday come to worship ready for Jesus to speak to and work in us through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Remember each Sunday, and each day of your life these words from Philippians 4:4-6: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do you 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 transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*