

“True Joy”

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; Luke 1: 47-55

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I fear that as I begin today’s sermon you will begin to suspect that all I read is children’s literature, specifically children’s literature written by Dr. Seuss. Last week we heard about the “waiting place” from Dr. Seuss’s *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*. This week I draw your attention to a more seasonally appropriate piece—none other than *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Most of you I suppose know the story of how the Grinch hated Christmas—everything about it. Unfortunately, he lived near a whole community of people who absolutely loved Christmas—the Whos down in Who-ville. Finally fed up with all the presents and singing and celebrating, the Grinch decides to steal Christmas from every Who down in Who-ville. He pulls off this feat on Christmas Eve. The next morning he waits and listens for crying as the Whos discover that Christmas has not come. But the Grinch doesn’t hear crying.

“But the sound wasn’t sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn’t be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!
He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming!
IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: ‘How could it be so?
‘It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!

It came without packages, boxes or bags!
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more! (*The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, Dr. Seuss*)

It's now crunch time. If my count is correct, 10 more shopping days until Christmas. Last week, walking through Target, with aching feet, burning eyes and a confused mind about what I had bought and what I have yet to buy, I said to myself "There's something wrong with this picture." This shopping experience is robbing me of joy.

But then I thought later, is that really the case? Can anyone or anything rob me of TRUE joy? The Grinch could not successfully rob the Whos of Christmas—TRUE Christmas. So can anyone or anything rob you and me of TRUE joy?

I suppose this question came to mind for me because of my recent trip to Elkton to assist with the funeral of my friend, Charlie Gravett. Charlie's health had declined rapidly in the last months before his death. During those last months he could no longer care for himself completely. He had to be assisted with all of his needs by his wife, Betty, their friends, the home health care professionals, or their children.

Betty reflected after Charlie's death that through it all he never lost his dignity. The illness didn't "rob him of his dignity." She said that Charlie's dignity wasn't based on his circumstances; it was deeply internal; it was a part of who he was. Circumstances could not rob him of his dignity—his TRUE dignity.

Somehow, I think it's the same for joy—TRUE joy. It's not based on circumstances. It's not just about feelings that come and go. Otherwise, I don't believe Paul could have said in Thessalonians as he did in Philippians: "Rejoice always." I don't believe Mary could have spoken the words she spoke "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" had it all just been about circumstances or feelings. Yes, there was good news in the words the angel spoke to her about bearing the Messiah. But Mary also knew that she was looking at being pregnant out of wedlock—an offense punishable by stoning to death in her day. Mary, Paul, the people of Thessalonica and Philippi all had circumstances that were not joyful, yet they rejoiced. They had TRUE joy, which cannot be robbed from us by circumstances.

But if this joy is not caused by or taken away by circumstances, what is its root? Where does it come from? Mary says: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary's attention is focused not on her circumstances, not even on herself, but on God. She rejoices in who God is, what God has done and what God promises to do. Paul, even while writing from prison knowing his life might soon be taken, says to the Philippians says: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." In Thessalonians, Paul speaks to a struggling church, yet he says: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." For Paul and for Mary, joy is rooted in knowing God, trusting God, praising God. It's not simply positive thinking. It's not denial of reality. It's not a head-in-the-sand approach to life. It's not a Polly Anna existence. It's not just looking on the

bright side. It's not external "bubbliness." It's not simply "don't worry, be happy."

Roger Nishioko is currently a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary (one of our Presbyterian Seminaries in Decatur, Georgia.) He's a phenomenal preacher and he is an expert in youth and young adult ministries.

About a year ago now, Roger preached for our presbytery. In his sermon, he shared this story from his life when he was a teenager. His church competed with other churches and groups in a volleyball league. One day his church's team, of which he was a member, was playing and one of their star players went up for a spike. As this young man—young father—young husband jumped for the ball he suffered a massive heart attack and died. Roger said it was an incredible blow to the congregation, the community and of course to the young man's widow and young children.

Roger said they all gathered for the funeral service with heavy hearts. At the end of the service, the young man's widow stood up and moved to the front of the church, holding her children's hands. She spoke a few words of gratitude and then began to sing a chorus that is also among my favorites from my college days.

*"How lovely on the mountains are the feet of them
Who bring good news, good news,
Announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness.
Our God reigns, our God reigns.
Our God reigns, Alleluia,
Our God reigns. Our God reigns. Our God reigns"*

Roger said that as he watched and listened to that young woman, amid her grief, sing this song of faith, radiating joy, hope and peace he knew that he, too, wanted to know God more fully and to spend his life helping others to know God.

Somehow this grieving woman was able to rejoice in the Lord—not her circumstances. Somehow she was able to give thanks to God even amid the terrible circumstances surrounding her husband’s death.

During some of my training for ministry I worked in a hospital as an on-call chaplain. Several times I was paged by the Emergency Room to come and be there with families as doctors shared the news that their loved ones had died. One night I was paged and when I arrived I was briefed on the situation and then sent to be with a man in his 70s who was about to be told that his wife of nearly 50 years had died. In our conversations prior to the doctor arriving, the man told me that he was a retired Methodist minister. Then the doctor came in and told the news. The man raised up in his seat and shouted at the top of his lungs, cursing God and crying. It didn’t last long. Quiet sobs, the sharing of memories followed. Some time passed. Some family members arrived. We were then allowed to go into the room where his wife’s body lay. Not an easy moment for anyone. Silence, tears, tender words . . . and then this man who had cursed God as he heard the news, took our hands and said I want us to pray. Perhaps it was all those years of training in doing it for others, but I don’t think that was all. He, too, even in intense grief, found within himself by the grace of God something TRUE, something real, a faith that was firm. I heard in his prayer TRUE joy even amid TRUE grief, TRUE anguish, TRUE pain.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18).

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice . . . Do not 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 surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus “ (Philippians 4: 4-7)

As I look at and listen to Paul’s words both in Thessalonians and in Philippians it stands out to me that prayer is mentioned in both passages. Prayer and joy seem to be closely related. They seem to go hand in hand. Prayer is one answer to worry. Prayer is how we surrender ourselves to God and to God’s will. Prayer is how we express our fears, hopes, dreams, pain and needs, our thanksgiving and our sins, knowing that God hears, understands, welcomes, pardons, cleanses and relieves. Prayer helps us to be open vessels for TRUE joy, TRUE peace and TRUE love.

For many of us there is a great longing in our hearts for this TRUE joy. Many of us still struggle to know TRUE joy, when our lives are topsy turvy; when we’ve messed up; when others have hurt us; when the demands of work, home, school, life come crashing down on us; when we are sick; when we are grieving.

Although I struggle personally to know this TRUE joy on a consistent basis, I am convinced that God offers us this gift—this fruit of the Spirit. I am more and more convinced that this joy has nothing to do with our circumstances and everything to do with God. I am more and more convinced that no one and no situation can rob this TRUE joy from us.

Today we leave here to face all kinds of situations in our lives. We go to finish preparations and shopping for Christmas, we go to face challenging relationships with our spouses and kids and parents and friends and co-workers

and who knows who else. We go to look ourselves in the mirror and to know the many ways we've not measured up. Some of us go to grieve, to suffer, to question, to weep. All of these things and more can rob us of happiness and superficial joy, but they cannot rob us of TRUE joy.

The Grinch thought he could rob the Whos down in Whoville of Christmas. But he couldn't. 'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more!' The Grinch couldn't rob the Whos of TRUE Christmas.

Some thought Charlie Gravett would be robbed of his dignity in the latter days of his life as he had to be cared for by others. But it wasn't. For he possessed TRUE dignity.

I'm sure many people in the church and community where the young father died suddenly thought death could rob a young widow of faith and joy. But it didn't. For she had TRUE joy in her life by God's grace—a joy not rooted in circumstances which change, but a joy rooted in a relationship with God.

I'm sure the people in the hospital who heard the anguished cries and curses of a grieving man thought death could rob him of faith and joy. But it didn't. Because faith and joy mean a little bit more.

Today as we go from this place we may be tempted to blame all kinds of "joy robbers" for our less than joyful existences. We may blame our families, we may blame Wall Street or Main Street, we may blame ourselves. But TRUE joy cannot be robbed from us. It is a great and abiding gift from God.

Today may we open ourselves to God—to open ourselves to joy—TRUE joy—the joy that is rooted in knowing God in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

‘Maybe Christmas,’ the Grinch thought, ‘doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more!’” Maybe True joy doesn’t come from a store, either. Maybe True joy is more than a feeling that comes and goes. Maybe True joy . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more!