

John 15:9-11 & Philippians 4:4
“Be the Church: Stay Joyful”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2022

The Readings:

John 15:9-11

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

You and I have experienced **many moments of joy together** across these last three years. We can rejoice over them *all*, but I will mention just a few now from my vantage point. For instance, I recall how fun that first Giving Thanks feast was that we shared in the fellowship hall in 2019. Then, once we went to Zoom worships, I can see in my mind’s eye, Jovanni serving as the Coffee Hour host on screen. Later, it was also such a pleasure to watch our children and youth bringing in the figurines to create the manger scene on Christmas Eve! I remember Easter, too, and all of us singing the Hallelujah Chorus wearing masks. Jon Campbell being baptized online was very moving. When we rang our church bells for justice with the Roslindale community, it gave me goose bumps. And I jumped for joy to hear from Mary that you had a candidate for settled pastor!

Moments of joy: we should share them with each other and rejoice together!

Some people, I suppose, might not think that a church *should* rejoice, given today’s context. They might argue that with so much evil afoot, with wrongdoing, corruption, and suffering rampant around us, a church should instead maintain a serious, pious demeanor. To also be respectful of those battling mental illnesses, maybe it should tamp down its joy, they’d say. It’s true that there is not much to rejoice about when violence against enemies of war abroad and against people of color here at home is so pervasive! Or when politicians twist justice and ignore the welfare of all!

I was a member of a college group that would celebrate each other’s birthdays. First we would sing the traditional version of “Happy Birthday,” but on its heels, rather tongue-in-cheek, a dirge: “Happy Birthday, oh, Happy Birthday! Hunger, sickness, and despair, children dying everywhere, but Happy Birthday!”

I get it. Sometimes it’s not respectful to rejoice!

But let’s look more closely at the passage from the Gospel of John. When Jesus told the disciples to abide in his love and how much he wanted them to remain joyful – verse 11: “so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” – his arrest,

trial, and crucifixion were imminent! This teaching is part of his Farewell Discourse. The religious powers of the day had tried to crush his movement for the Kingdom of God. Their society then was just as sinful, power-hungry, inequitable, and toxically divided. Jesus and his followers were in danger. Nevertheless, Jesus wanted them to experience the joy that *he* had in relationship with God; he wanted his church to stay joyful.

So the joy Jesus was talking about was not false, fake, or Pollyannaish; his joy wasn't disrespectful or inauthentic. His joy was true and deep, connected to the Source – a spiritual gift from Above, not contingent upon perfection or outside circumstances. As one has pointed out, we don't rejoice in evil; we rejoice in the Lord Jesus! **How do we stay joyful?**

Steve and I have been re-watching the Netflix television drama, *Bridgerton*. Set in 19th century London, the main love story unfolds between Simon, the Duke of Hastings, and Daphne Bridgerton, daughter of the Viscount. The newlyweds have gone through numerous, emotional ups and downs in their relationship. They can't seem to stay together and embrace happiness. Finally, with vulnerability, Simon confesses to Daphne: "I don't know how to be the one you need and deserve." She, too, lets down her defenses and reassures him: "Yes, you do. I know you do. Just *stay!*"

"Stay" is one translation of the Greek word "meno;" it is repeated *eleven* times in chapter 15 of John, sometimes as "remain," or "abide." **In other words, the key to staying joyful is *staying* in relationship with Jesus Christ – *in* him.**

There is still some mystery, of course, in *how* his joy is shared with us. So John uses an agricultural metaphor to help us understand. He says that Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches that sprout from him. We are completely dependent upon him. Christ, the vine, is rooted and grounded in God's love, the soil of the Creator. By extension, the church is fed by these nutrients and the living water traveling through our connections. We are coaxed upward by the sun, and pruned by the Gardener to produce fruits of love. We stay joyful by staying or abiding in him.

The human body can also serve to describe this mystery. Christ is like the pumping heart of the church, pushing the blood through arteries and veins to supply the brain and all the bodily systems with necessary oxygen. The church is alive and joyful as it nurtures the connections from one part of the Body to the others.

In more practical terms, the church is able to stay joyful through spiritual practices. You and I don't take seriously enough the power of regular worship attendance and fellowship; it matters how we speak to each other for the flow of joy! We underestimate the importance of bible reading and discussion, of our monetary pledges, of our acts of service to those in need, and our advocacy in society. These disciplines nurture joy!

Two of the most inspiring faith leaders I can imagine came together for a week-long conversation, which turned into *The Book of Joy*:¹ the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. You can probably visualize both of them with smiles on their faces. I was impressed by the practices of joy that they include in the book for us, and with their own personal practices. From the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the 14th Dalai Lama believes that

¹The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy* (New York: Avery, 2016).

“the purpose of life is to find happiness,” and he rises at 3AM to meditate five hours before starting his day! He and Archbishop Desmond Tutu meditated together that week.

Then, for his part, I was really glad to learn which practice Tutu shared. He offered the rite of Communion in Christ to his friend, and they partook together. It is an act that replenishes joy.

What *we* do today, then, as church, is truly an act of staying in Christ and staying joyful!