

Sermon: Jesus Joy
3 Advent, Year C
Luke 3:7-18

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December 16, 2018

I am not a big Facebook person. I rarely post anything. But on Wednesday evening I posted Matthew Poteat's announcement about our Blue Christmas service that he is leading this coming Friday night here at Emmanuel. Within a short time the post had at least 80 "likes." I think most of you know that a "like" means someone saw what you posted and it resonated with that person. Something about this post struck a chord with a lot of people. Perhaps all of those "likes" mean that for a lot of people the holidays don't feel all that bright and they are not feeling all that darn cheerful. The Blue Christmas is designed for people who are feeling blue at Christmas time, for folks who, for all kinds of reasons, aren't feeling all that merry or jolly, are not full of the so-called Christmas spirit and instead feel sad and sorrowful.

But isn't today supposed to be the day we celebrate joy? You noticed we lit the pink candle this morning on our Advent wreath. You no doubt heard the word *joy* or *rejoice* in several of this morning's readings. In Zephaniah "(the LORD) will *rejoice* over you with gladness", in our song from Isaiah "Therefore you shall draw water with *rejoicing*, and in the letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "*Rejoice* in the Lord always; again I will say, *Rejoice*." And just as we are moving through our lectionary readings so nicely with that theme of joy and rejoicing, John the Baptist (JtB) throws a bucket of water on all of that rejoicing by saying, "You brood of vipers!"

What a killjoy! Evidently he hadn't heard this is Gaudete Sunday, the day we are mandated to rejoice. And he definitely hasn't read Dale Carnegie's book, "How to win friends and influence people"! Right? ...Right? I mean if someone called you a viper, wouldn't you either want to shout back at him or run in the other direction? And yet, that is not what happens here in the Gospel story. People actually seek JtB out in the wilderness to hear him. Something about the locust eating, shaggy haired wild man compels people to come to him.

When things are going well for us it is easy to rejoice, easy to believe that we've got it under control, easy to think that life is good. And ...it's easy to think we have no need for God. Perhaps those who came out to see John tB knew something was missing in their lives. Maybe they had come to the end of their proverbial ropes in some way. Perhaps their relationships were in tatters, or their financial resources were dissolving or their consciences were letting them know something was amiss. "What are we to do?" they asked. And John set them straight, giving each of them something specific to do, something that might not strike us as all that holy or heavenly, maybe even ordinary: share your possessions, you who have more than you need, and stop cheating people, you who have been preying on the vulnerable. Or "share, care and be fair" as a friend of mine puts it. John seems to know what repenting or turning toward God will mean for each person who asks. It seems the words *repent* and *turn* won't leave us this Advent!

As JtB gives each person a word about what he or she needs to do, he is helping them to turn toward God, helping them get to the core of who they really are in God's eyes; and if they are made in God's image, there are some changes that need to be made! Then we come to the sentence about the wheat, the winnowing fork, the threshing floor and fire and separating it all out, all imagery of Judgment Day. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to

clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Whether for John's immediate audience or you and me right here and now, the statement invites the questions, "Am I to be the wheat, the part that is gathered in on Judgment Day? Or am I the chaff, the part of the wheat plant that is not redeemable or heaven bound, that will be burned up?"

I wonder if God our Judge is not out to condemn us but to see us clearly, to sort out, to perceive what is good and right within each of us, to know us as we truly are. I wonder if what John meant here is that our core being, the part of us that is made in God's image, will be sorted out from all that which is not of use to God? For isn't there a little bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us? There is hope for all of us. Perhaps the joy we seek can be found in Jesus himself, the one whose love far outweighs the sin in us, the one whose very life was given for our redemption, the one who will never leave us to face our sorrows alone, the one who so wants our wholeness rather than our destruction.

Life is full of struggles *and* blessings, full of sorrow *and* happiness, full of failure *and* success, grief *and* joy. JtB and Jesus are realists, and often speak about the darker, more troubling aspects of life: sin, wars, injustice, oppression, but in the midst of it there is hope and certainly the potential for joy. Theologian Henri Nouwen, wrote, "God's joy can be ours in the midst of it all. It is the joy of belonging to the household of God whose love is stronger than death and who empowers us to be in the world while already belonging to the kingdom of joy." Nouwen also writes, "In our world joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below (on earth), joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist with God. Jesus, the Son of God, is a man of sorrows, but also a man of complete joy."ⁱ

As Christians, followers of Jesus, we can experience joy even in our sorrow. I am not talking about fleeting happiness that comes and goes and is dependent on our outer circumstances, when everything seems to be going well, but the joy that comes with believing in Jesus. Jesus joy. The joy that pink candle represents. We are not only allowed to have it, we are mandated to claim it and experience it.

So as we ponder the sorrows of this world, both our own as well as the sorrow of those in our midst, can we approach those sorrows with faith that God is with us as we walk together? Our aim in having the Blue Christmas service is to walk with the sorrowful, to show compassion and to offer hope, to note the light in the midst of darkness. As you go through these next several days, if you yourself are experiencing sadness, I pray you will also have at the core of your being some quiet but authentic Jesus joy. And if you are feeling good these days, I pray you will pay attention to those around you who might need your loving attention, your kind word, and your patience. In your joy, may you share, care and be fair. Amen.

ⁱ Nouwen, Henri, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday Books, p.116-117