

# Real Joy

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Psalm 100

Sermons Series:  
Best Spiritual  
Practices

*How many  
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Presbyterian  
dance in  
worship?*

**T**oday is America's 234<sup>th</sup> birthday. We'll gather in cities and towns across America to celebrate this momentous day in our nation's history. Our country's biggest celebration will take place right in our own backyard. The first year Chris and I moved to DC, we joined the throngs to watch the fireworks on the mall. What a zoo! I find it ironic that 80 percent of the fireworks used to celebrate this uniquely-styled, American holiday have been imported from China.

This summer, we're focusing on corporate spiritual practices. We call these disciplines corporate for the simple reason that they're meant to be practiced together. Last Sunday, I talked about spiritual friends, urging us to find faith friends to share the journey. Today, we're focusing on celebration. How appropriate on a day when we're celebrating our American independence.

You may not regard celebration as a spiritual practice, yet it's a desperately needed corrective for people who are earnest about practicing Christian disciplines. Otherwise, these disciplines will become dull and tedious.

It's curious that God commanded ancient Israel to cele-

brate three religious festivals every year—Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Perhaps God knew of the propensity for religious people to take themselves too seriously. We take God seriously, but not ourselves too seriously. Elton Trueblood said it well: "I don't trust the theology of any person who doesn't laugh."

The Psalmist implores us, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing" (Psalm 100:1-3). Making a joyful noise is not only what tone deaf people do. Our worship of God is meant to be exuberant and enthusiastic.

When King David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the temple, he danced before the Lord with all his might (2 Samuel 6:14,16). How many times have you seen a Presbyterian dance in worship? I've rarely seen a Presbyterian move in worship!

We sometimes sing the Doxology like a dirge. We conduct the Lord's Supper with the solemnity of a funeral. This Eucharist, as it is sometimes called, which is a word meaning "with joy" or "thanksgiving," is meant to prefigure a great messianic banquet we will share at the consummation of

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history with believers from all times and places, hosted by our risen Lord.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher and renowned atheist Frederick Nietzsche often accused Christians of having no joy. He found more joy in bars and brothels than in most churches of his day. The Christians he came across seemed a rather sorry and joyless lot. In Nietzsche's words, "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

Oliver Wendell Holmes was a celebrated member of the U. S. Supreme Court for over 30 years in the early 1900s. His wit and wisdom ranks him as one of the most widely quoted jurists in Supreme Court history. He once said about his choice of a career, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

The words joy and rejoicing are found everywhere in Scripture. Would you believe 330 times in the Bible? Joy in the Bible is not tied to pleasant circumstances. Joy is an inner disposition of the heart. Joy's object in Psalm 100 is none other than God. We enter *His* gates and *His* courts with joy.

Joy is not synonymous with happiness. Happy originates from an Old Norse word "hap" meaning fortune, chance and luck. Happiness is linked to outward circumstances. Do I like my job? Do I like the

people in my life? Do I like my life?

Four thousand books were published in the U.S. on happiness last year. That's up from 50 books on happiness published in 2000. So how come we are less happy today? Studies show that Americans are becoming less happy. What gives?

If this summer holds true to form, our high school students will return from mission projects with a new appreciation for what constitutes true happiness. Our students will travel to places like rural Appalachia and Mexico expecting so-called poor people to be unhappy. Quite the contrary, some poor people are profoundly happy, more so than their rich, suburban counterparts. Some of the most joyful people are not rich in things. Money doesn't buy happiness, after all.

Jesus doesn't promise people happiness. Instead he offers them joy: "I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full" (15:11).

C. S. Lewis was primarily a writer, not a preacher. But he preached a sermon in Oxford, England in 1942 entitled, *The Weight of Glory*: "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because

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he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, he is most easily pleased.” We fool around with temporal desires when God offers us infinite joy.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Is there joy in your life? Have you experienced what the Biblical writers call “the joy of the Lord?” I don’t mean the back-slapping, syrupy, feigned type of joy but a deep-down, peace-that-passes-all-understanding kind of joy.

To access joy in your life, I invite you to rate your irritability factor. When circumstances don’t go your way, do you become cranky and irritable? If you are uncertain about your answer and have come with other people this morning, ask them! The people seated next to you may give you a little help with this question!

We do not manufacture joy on our own, but there are things we can do to bring joy to everyday living. As Dallas Willard writes, “Grace is opposed to earning but not to effort.”

Joni Eareckson Tada has lived her adult life as paraplegic resulting from a diving accident at age 19. She has become an accomplished Christian speaker and author. During break at a women’s conference where she was speaking, several women crowded around Joni. One woman said, “Oh Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I

wish I had your joy.” Several of the other women agreed with her assessment. “How do you do it?” she asked.

“I don’t do it,” Joni said. “Let me tell you how I woke up this morning. When my husband left for work at 6AM, I knew my friend would be arriving shortly to get me ready for the day. Soon I heard the front door open. My friend had arrived to get me ready for work. When I heard her make the coffee, I prayed, ‘Oh Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, dress me, sit me in my chair, brush my hair and teeth and send me out the door. I don’t have the energy to face this routine one more day. I have no resources. I don’t have a smile to take into the day. But you do. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.’”

“So what happens when your friend comes through the bedroom door?” her friend asked. “I turn my head toward her and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It’s not mine; it’s God’s. And so,” she said, gesturing to her paralyzed legs, “whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning.” Do your part and God will do the rest. Joy is a by-product of loving and serving God. I offer the same benediction each Sunday, “Love the Lord and love the people. Serve the Lord and serve the people.” Joy is not the goal. Loving and serving God is the goal.

***“The best argument for Christianity is Christians...”***

Jesus said to his followers, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I abide in them bear much fruit” (John 15:5-6). Paul lists joy as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. “The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control” (Galatians 5:22). These fruits are not the result of sheer human effort. They are the consequence of loving and serving God.

Let me take you back to our church’s mission statement. We aspire to become “a joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and our neighbor.” The first adjective to depict our community is joyful. Would that we would become a community of joy!

***“...But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians.”***

Sheldon Vanauken was an American author who taught at Lynchburg College. He was madly in love with his wife, Davy, but was devastated when she succumbed to cancer at the tender age of 39. He began a correspondence with C. S. Lewis whose wife, Joy, was also felled by cancer at an early age. It’s not lost on me that her name was Joy! Vanauken writes in his autobiography, *A Severe Mercy* (I commend it to any in the throes of grief or despair), about a profound new awareness of joy not based on external variables. He writes about joy, “The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their

completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths.”

William Kethe was a friend of the great Protestant reformer John Knox. His Protestant convictions were unwelcome in 16<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, forcing him into exile. He wrote hymns during his exile that became part of the 1561 Genevan Psalter or songbook. He is best known for the hymn “All People That on Earth Do Dwell.” The tune, called Old Hundredth, was composed by Louis Bourgeois, who served as a musical composer for John Calvin in Geneva. You may be interested to know that Louis was imprisoned by local authorities in Geneva for the unauthorized changing of hymn tunes. People liked the old hymn tunes and didn’t want to sing the new ones. I tell you, some things never change! As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, let’s sing this hymn with joy.

