



Joy to You!

**Rev. E. Stanley Ott
Vienna Presbyterian Church**

**Psalm 46:1; Psalm 16:11;
Philippians 2:2; John 15:11**

September 12, 2021

I have spent my entire career in the church serving in the senior staff levels of large churches and I have worked with hundreds of pastors around the country. I say with great affection and respect that you, Pete James, have no peer. To lead this congregation through forty-two years of growth and through all of the heights and valleys that you would expect over such time and to end up with a vigorous, vital, happy, healthy, bubbling congregation, that has a massive sense of mission and of its future, is beyond awesome.

You preached your first sermon here on May 13, 1979 and your last one on February 28, 2021, around 3500 sermons or so. I was tempted to take one of your old sermons, memorize it cold, use your gestures, and see if you figured it out! I listened to your last sermon this week and heard you say, “People have been asking me how I’m feeling. I’m feeling lots of things but the strongest emotion is one of gratitude, thanking God for calling Chris and me to join you for these 42 years.” Well, honestly Pete and Chris, that’s our strongest emotion, too.

I’ve been thinking about the past 42 years for you two - about the qualities you share of steadfastness, vision, encouragement, and integrity - that your behind-the-scenes lives and marriage have been the very same life with Jesus that Pete has preached for 42 years. I reflected on all of the statistics, the growth of VPC through the years, the capital campaigns that led to this incredible facility, the launching of three very vibrant new, congregations, the Great Banquet ministry, Monday Night Men’s Ministry, and the marvelous mission ministries over the years. I thought of memorable words from you such as *Call, Equip, Send* and *Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Faith, Family Friends*, as well as your marvelous benediction *Love the Lord and Love the People!* Beyond all of that, and so much more, are the countless friendships of the heart we have with you. I could go on. We aren’t just grateful, we are beyond grateful.

You may have seen the wonderful framed picture of Pete that is out in the lobby. It’s going to be placed in the parlor, which is to my left. There are several pictures there of our former pastor, Horace Lukens. The picture of Dick Hutcheson, another former pastor, will be added, and the parlor will be renamed the Pastors’ Parlor. If you want to mess with Pete a bit, just text him a selfie of yourself with his picture next to you!

Most of us know where we were twenty years yesterday and what we were doing when the planes went into the Twin Towers and into the Pentagon. In those days, I remember everyone quoting Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” and the emphasis was on the “very.” God is a *very* present help! On the morning of September 11, I took off at 8:00 in the morning from Pittsburgh in an airplane flying to Los Angeles, where I was to speak to a group about congregational vitality. We landed in Kansas City, a scheduled landing, having no clue as to what was happening. The attendant said, “Take your carry-ons with you. We must be changing planes.” So, she didn’t know what was happening either.

Inside the terminal, I called Ann Marie, who audibly breathed a sigh of relief. I thought, “Wow, I’ve only been gone three hours. That woman is into me!” Then she told me what was happening to other planes bound for the West Coast and said, “Find a television.” It took a while for it to dawn on us that flying was no longer an option. I went to a car rental agency and stood there, 40th in line. Another call to Ann Marie. She said, “Speak up and ask if anybody is driving to Pittsburgh.” I clicked off the phone a bit annoyed. No way. I’m a guy. I don’t do that! At that exact moment, someone hollered, “Anybody want a ride to Cincinnati”? Primed by Ann Marie, I hollered, “I do!” It turned out Greg York was an employee of Procter and Gamble, and their corporate travel people got them a ten-passenger van and they were driving around picking up people to fill their vehicle.

Before we started for Cincinnati, Greg York said, “If it would be all right with you, I don’t want to offend, I think it would be appropriate if we prayed....” Everyone in the van nodded yes. “Father,” prayed Greg, “we pray for those under those collapsing buildings, for the rescue workers, and the many families caught in great confusion. Be their help and guide. We pray for George Bush, our president, and pray for our own trip.” I will never forget his prayer. At a gas stop, one of the fellows went to a chicken place and bought a bag of deep-fried chicken gizzards. You want to know what surreal is? It’s flying west to Los Angeles one minute to talk about congregational vitality and three hours later driving east in a van across Kansas eating deep fried chicken gizzards! In Cincinnati, I stayed with Pat and Ann Hartsock, good friends of Pete and Chris, and the next day I rode a Greyhound bus home. My seat partner, Rebekah Parkin, was a wonderful lady from here, Washington. We had a marvelous conversation covering faith and many matters. Rebecca and I, and Greg York and I, have exchanged an email every 9/11 for twenty years.

Mine was a flying adventure. However, for those in New York and in Washington, it was a very trying adventure, unimaginable trauma. Paul’s words are powerful for us followers of Jesus, “For we do not live for ourselves. We do not die for ourselves. If we live, we live for the Lord and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). Get that? Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. Living or dying, we are alive in Jesus and will live with Jesus. Our role while we live on earth is to serve. Our role in dying is to bring honor to our Lord and to go to be with him. That was true on 9/11 and it’s true now.

Now, twenty years later, I have an observation and a question. The observation is that I believe our deepest selves still hold to the values we saw on 9/11 – self-sacrifice, communities bonding, great courage, and integrity. At the same time, I ask this question: How did we move from the unity and oneness of purpose on 9/11, just twenty years ago, to the divisive state of our society now, which the pandemic has only made worse? Bill Bishop wrote a book titled, *The Big Sort*. He speaks of the early years of our country when so many immigrants from many places arrived, and America was a “melting pot” in which all those groups merged into who we

are. However, now, Bishop says we are sorting in to sub-groups of likeness – similar politics, wealth, education, religion, ethnicity and so on. All of us see the rise of tribalism; people have their go-to groups and their go-to news sources that peddle fear of other go-to groups over substantive news.

Today, I am not speaking to America but to those of us in the Christian community. I find many Christians in all the various political, theological, and other sorts of tribes are saying that they love Jesus while demonstrating paranoia, the inability to compromise, and contempt for those in other tribes. How can that be? Jesus said, “Love your enemies!” Remember, in the Book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reports, “Jesus Christ himself is our peace...and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:15). He broke down the dividing wall at the expense of his own life. He chose not to show paranoia and contempt. If you find yourself on one side of a dividing wall of hostility you have a choice - show paranoia, inflexibility, and contempt, or you may be a bridge, joining Jesus in breaking down walls. For Jesus and for all of us, the bottom line is joy! As Paul wrote, “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). As C.S. Lewis said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven!”

Some time ago, I was visiting someone dear to me who was in the hospital. The doctor came in to the room, so I slipped out and went to the hospital waiting room, which had a couple rows of chairs facing the elevators. I was all alone except for one older gentleman, who I eventually learned was waiting for a doctor to return with a prescription. People walked past us and this man would nod to them and offer the warm comment, “Have a blessed day.” After that had gone on for a while and we were alone, I said to him, “Now that’s a great word, ‘Have a blessed day,’ because it suggests that you are trusting God to do the blessing.” The man turned to me with the biggest smile and said, “That’s right!” He went on to say that he had opened his life to Jesus Christ just within the previous week and he described the power of his experience of Jesus.

Then he asked me, “Do you know what *blessed* means?” I replied, “Well, I have an understanding of it but what do *you* think it means?” He smiled and said, “It means, ‘He will make you rise!’” I said, “I love that!” At which point the doctor stopped by to give him his prescription. This gracious man pushed the elevator button and when it arrived, he stepped into the elevator and as doors were closing, he looked me in the eye and said, “Have a blessed day.” I smiled and said, “He will make you rise!” and the man was gone. The memory of that moment has come to me countless times. Have a blessed day. Have a *shalom* day. Have a joyful day because Jesus will make you rise! Jesus is about joy!

My first job in a church was given the title Ministerial Assistant. I knew very little in those days and thought it was a nice title but came to learn it was code for peon, pond scum, gopher! Eventually, I was promoted to Director of Parish Life and then Associate Pastor, all

those years reporting to Jim Tozer, one of the great pastors anywhere, who became my mentor and my friend. In those days, the primary means of written communication was letters, hundreds of letters. I discovered that Jim signed all of his letters, “Joyfully, Jim.” I really liked that but thought signing my letters, “Joyfully, Stan,” was too copycat-y so I began to sign them “With joy – Stan,” and did that for many years.

Then one day my mother told me she was loving the books by Patrick O’Brian, some of the finest historical fiction ever written. The books were all about Jack Aubrey, the captain of a tall ship sailing ship in the early 1800’s and Stephen Maturin, his ship’s doctor – about their friendship, life aboard the ship, the politics of the day, and their loves and personal lives. The first of the books, *Master and Commander*, was turned into a movie and you may have heard of it.

I began to read the 20 or so books and one day I realized that throughout the books, when two people talked and then parted ways, instead of saying *goodbye* or *see ya* or *ciao* or *have a good day* or *take care of yourself*, instead of any of that, they simply said, “I wish you joy.” “Joy to you.” I love that. I wish you joy, joy to you. I realized my “with joy” was fine, but it was about *my* joy whereas Joy to You is about *your* joy. At that point, I changed all of my signatures to Joy to you - Stan. It’s a version of “have a blessed day” except it’s “have a joyful day.” So, what we say to you, Pete and Chris and Andrew and Emily and your families, is “joy to you” because we deeply wish joy for you. When Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11), we know Jesus is looking every one of us in the eye and saying, “Joy to you!”

