

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“The Substance of Joy”
Matthew 11: 2-11
Pastor Jonathan

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Advent III

What are your most joyful memories? Share something. Are they at Christmas?

I’m the last one to say look at me and be as joyful as I am. In fact, I attend a men’s bible study over video conference with men from California, Idaho, Montana, Chile and Canada, and I think I have a bit of a reputation of being like Eyeore. Perhaps that’s my voice, but it’s also my disposition. I’m not the bubbly, cheerful type. This world is too broken for me to constantly wear a smile. So if you see me less than happy looking, you can know that this doesn’t mean I have no happiness or joy in my life, it means the rest of life continues to influence me. It doesn’t mean Jesus is not influencing me, because He is. You know that it’s hard to read what’s going on in the inside of a person from the outside. Let’s judge rightly and not condemn. While saying that, it’s ok to check in with someone and say, “You look troubled...” or, “You look down,” and simply ask them what’s going on inside. That’s a good thing to do. Just don’t pre-judge too far.

Jesus had a way with people to deal with those who were too self-assured and self-confident, while still being full of grace and mercy for those extra hard on themselves, like the tax collector in Luke 18. Remember the Pharisee boasting in prayer...that he was not like other evil men...while the tax collector beat his breast and asked for mercy. Jesus was teaching that those who are open, transparent, and humbling themselves before Him will be exalted while those who exalt themselves will be humbled. You know which category you want to be in, right? Humble yourself now, so you won’t be humbled later...before Jesus. Spread out your sins and rebellion before Him and ask Him to deal with these even if you feel yourself unable to change.

Jesus knows us even before we come before Him. His arms are constantly extended to us, in the worst and best of circumstances, in the midst of high energy and health, in the midst of being tired out, and low in health.

The end of John the Baptizer’s ministry was not like its beginning. Its beginning was full of energy life, challenging the self-sufficient and curious,

while comforting the repentant. The end of John the Baptizer's ministry had him in prison, awaiting execution, although he didn't know that. The end of John the Baptizer's ministry found him questioning whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah. This doesn't sound good. The one Jesus had proclaimed as a great prophet, and a faithful pointer to Him, was wavering in what he believed.

How could this be? John was in prison and certainly was wondering if God had prison as his ministry rather than baptizing people at the Jordan or wherever. John had lots of time to question whether he had been a good minister, pointing faithfully, as he was being squandered in prison. Still, he had followers that visited him there. And these followers were asked to go see Jesus and ask Him directly about his identity and whether John had been correct or mistaken. Good for John. He didn't just mope or be passive-aggressive in an angry tone as some of us can become. He took an active role and asked Jesus whether He truly was the Christ, the Messiah.

And note well how Jesus responds. He doesn't say, "I condemn you for your lack of faith, John. How could you doubt me, or question my identity...?" He does not say this. He does not condemn John's questioning or his suffering in jail. He responds positively.

Jesus says to go tell John what you have seen today: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. These are fulfillments of the Messianic promises from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy...

instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.

Did you notice the oil of joy, the crown of beauty and the garment of praise?
That's your best Christmas outfit.

Jesus treats us with patience. He doesn't condemn us with a harsh voice, as some of us remember from our own family and friends. He tells John that He is the Messiah without boasting or parading or gaslighting (manipulating someone into questioning their own sanity). Jesus treats us kindly. He waits for us to see the reality before us. He joins us where we are, rather than dragging us somewhere else.

Matthew 11:6

"Blessed are those who do not fall away on account of me," Jesus says. While this may be pointed at John at that moment, it is also an eternal truth; similar to what Thomas asked in the Upper Room, when he questioned Jesus, saying, "We don't know what you're talking about...we don't know the way to where you, Jesus are going..." Jesus answers Thomas directly in John 14: 5-6, with the famous words: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Those were words directly answering Thomas' question, but at the same time were a huge spiritual truth, for everyone, throughout the ages.

Jesus will often answer your question directly or not, but regularly directing us to a principle enunciated in Scripture, which we will be able to remember as we continue to read daily the Scriptures and have our minds transformed by God's Word. This is why Bible reading isn't about how you feel about reading, or about your understanding everything you read. It is about your submitting your life and your time to the One who can speak to you and your circumstances.

In fact, Jesus will often affirm you, particularly where you share vulnerably with Him about how you can't see a way forward. He does this publicly with John the Baptizer, in his weak moment of asking if Jesus was truly the Messiah. He begins to affirm who John is. He does the same with us.

Jesus asks the crowd why John was so popular? Why would anyone travel into the desert regions of Israel to see that guy? Was he just another ordinary guy, like a reed swaying in the wind? No, he wouldn't have been worth traveling to see, if that were the case. So why did you travel to see Him? Was it because he was such a fine entertainer with amazing costumes? No, he wore smelly camel skins and did not sport the haircuts or deodorants of the day. So why did people go out to see him? Was it because he was God's spokesperson? A prophet? Yes. He was that and more, Jesus says. And if Jesus says this about you, it means a lot. It is huge. In fact, even more than that, Jesus says John fulfills the Scripture found in Malachi 3:1, the book just before the Gospel of Matthew. "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me." Jesus says that this is fulfilled in John. And everyone in that time and place will know the next part of that Messianic verse, which is another affirmation of Jesus as Messiah: "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come..." That's Jesus.

So right there and then, Jesus is affirming John the Baptizer is the last and ultimate prophet who points everyone to Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the One who will bring us into relationship with God, once and for all. And then that phrase occurs, Verily, verily, I say unto you... Truly, truly, I tell you... I'm speaking the plain truth... which John the Gospel writer often uses in his account of Jesus. It means: "Listen up. This is important. Take note." No one is greater than John the Baptizer amongst human beings. Now remember this was the guy that was wondering in prison whether Jesus was actually who he thought he was... the Messiah. Jesus is saying this guy who was doubting at that moment was the greatest of everyone born.

And He (Jesus) speaks lovingly to me and to you, affirming your worth, your identity, your meaning in this life. And Jesus speaks the truth. So if you are having a crisis of identity, or of worth... if you struggle with self-hatred or have a tendency to be extra hard on yourself... come close to Jesus. His voice will restore you to your proper position in the Kingdom of God. He did this with John. He does this with you and with me. In fact, Jesus says it right there and then after affirming that John is the greatest, then says he is the least compared to all of us who have the Holy Spirit dwelling us, believers and followers of Jesus Christ, after His death and resurrection.

But you may say, "Pastor, I don't think I am very important in the kingdom, in fact, I don't see anything of my life affecting the Mission of the King, the

ultimate goal of serving Jesus in this life...” Your importance is not yours to evaluate, but up to Jesus to assert. Your life’s strategic position geographically and historically is not yours to analyze, but God’s to put on display. What Jesus is looking for from you is a willingness to say “yes” and indeed to be put on display...not like a knick-knack, but as a work of art.

Here’s where we find the joy. We find the joy we are looking for, not in the things or gifts or power or abilities or accomplishments or resources or CV or education or rank...we find joy in hearing Jesus whisper His life purpose, goal and assessment of who we are.

Others may falsely identify or analyze our identity and purpose in this life. Even those closest to us may not see what Jesus sees. In fact, you can count on that. Nevertheless, Jesus sees it. He whispers our meaning and words of love for us, regardless of so many other things going on around us, in us, beside us.

Just take the time to listen. You will hear Him. Of course, we need to discern his voice from many others that would seek to destroy us. Even if Jesus wants to correct us, it is never with a voice of viciousness or impatience, not with unkind words or destructive phrases. Those are enemy voices. Learn the voice of the Master. There are very few places to know the peace that passes understanding and the joy that we all seek. Seek out the Author of Life.

Don’t confuse joy with happiness or contentment. Don’t confuse joy with a lack of conflict or a lack of suffering. It is an inner state of knowing Jesus knows you, and is for you. Know that you are His, and He is yours. Let us find joy from that place. And if you are not sure what I’m talking about, then please ask me, or one of the elders or someone next to you.

Let us pray.