

St James United Church

Message for December 12, 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent



“The Truth about Joy”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18; “Lift Up Your Heads” by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

For a change this Advent, I’m okay with the custom of focusing this Sunday on Joy. After all, it’s hard to argue with history. The Third Sunday was called *Gaudete* Sunday after the Latin for “rejoice” in the introit, the opening scripture sentences, for the day. That introit in part quotes Ps. 85 which speaks of restoration and peace. I like that. The introit reveals the connection between peace and joy, two sides of one coin.

Part of the connection is how they’re also joined to suffering. It’s why we light a rose-coloured candle on this day. Historically, Advent was penitential like Lent. Having *Gaudete* Sunday gave people some reprieve part way through the season, some rosy joy in the midst of struggle. The practice reminds me that joy is not the same as happiness. You can feel joy in the midst of sorrow. In fact, it’s often seen as necessary for joy, and vice versa. In *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama reminds us that we need suffering to appreciate joy. And as Desmond Tutu points out in the same book, suffering helps us grow in compassion, which in itself brings joy as we learn to reach out to others. In contrast, looking for happiness can be a focus on self, and in the end actually bring about our suffering when we don’t get what we want, and even if we do, it’s fleeting, and we just start the search again. Joy is deeper than happiness. Like the inner peace I spoke about last week, it grows in knowing who you are. And like peace, it is also about connection, knowing whose you are.

If you recall, last Sunday we heard John calling people to repent, to change their hearts and their lives. That rendering of repentance helps shift it from the sense of judgment we associate with the word to one of self-awareness, an admission not just of wrongs we’ve done and where we need to make amends, but an honest appraisal of deeper motivations. In the continuation of that passage which we hear today, John describes Jesus as someone who will thresh grain. Again, it’s not about judgment. Threshing isn’t separating good grain from bad. It removes the protective chaff to reveal the kernel within. It is an image that reminds me to be more loving and compassionate toward myself. Chaff isn’t bad. Similarly, often less likeable parts of my personality are ways I learned to protect myself. There are also parts I pretend aren’t there, not just things I wish I hadn’t done, but things I was taught as a child to feel ashamed about, to hide in order to fit in. Carl Jung called this our shadow. I need to pay attention to it because, for one, it can include creative, though less socially acceptable parts of me. Second, though I ignore it, my shadow influences what I do, think and say. One way to get in touch with it is to be attentive to what I find annoying in others. My feelings reveal more about me than them.

Jesus asked why we point at a splinter in another's eye but ignore the log in our own. My dislike of the other person often points to something I need to work on, be honest about, accept in myself. It isn't easy, but with compassion I can acknowledge and integrate the hidden parts, letting their gift come through. Then, like Zephaniah's words experienced within, there's no more judgment. Parts of me long in exile to my own heart are listened to, honoured. I feel peace and can rejoice as I look at who I am as God does, without shame but love and praise.

The compassion I show myself in this process is needed in my relationships too, which I find further connects the gift of joy with peace. Yes, I look at my reaction to others to see the areas in my life I need to accept and come to love. But I'm called to show them the same compassion I showed myself, especially as I see my own struggle in theirs. Rather than lash out, I can listen, be present, and possibly give them space to grow. All of this sounds therapeutic, I know, but in the end, it is really just about connection, about being in solidarity. And as I feel that, I can give more freely, simply because they are, and not for what I will get in return. The advice John gave to those he baptized taps into this as he called them to think of others and not just themselves. As I said earlier, the search for happiness fails because there will always be something more I want. But when I give, look after others, I experience joy. Rather than want more, I get more, the love from which joy comes multiplying so I can give again. This in turn calls me to extend love and joy further. John's advice went beyond his listeners giving from their surplus. In reaching out to someone without, it invited them into relationship and created a chance to address the question of why one had two coats and the other none. This doesn't just bring joy; it nurtures peace because we address the roots of conflict. It is all connected, loving compassion begetting joy and peace.

The initial joy that comes from personal acceptance is a gift that keeps spilling over, widens to embrace more and more. Consider John again. As I said last week, we're all blessed, good, loved as we are, not for what we do, believe, where we're from. John treated soldiers and tax collectors the same way he treated anyone coming to him, collaborators and Gentiles as much as Jerusalem elites and Galilean peasants, including Jesus whom John baptized, the one we call son of God, a child of humanity and so needing to accept his shadow like any of us. The witness of both John and Jesus was one of expansive solidarity, no aspect of our lives, outer or inner, outside of God's love, no person or community excluded either, Zephaniah lived out between us as well as within. No wonder Steve Garnaas-Holmes could affirm such hope and joy in his poem. "The Beloved is moving in this world" and as she moves so grows the gift of new life, of restoration for us all.

Which is what we are on the cusp of celebrating. Each Advent we light candles and often do so pondering hope, peace, joy and love. In the end each gift is connected, their source in God, a fire burning within, connecting our hearts and drawing us close. That's the advent we honour each year, not just a birth long ago but a meeting wherever we turn. This One is born again and again. In him, we know who we are and whose, connected to each other, called in loving compassion to care for one another, from which grows peace, which brings hope. Now that's something to rejoice about. Amen.