

THE ADVENT OF JOY

(12/11/11)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 14:17; 15:13
Luke 2:8-14

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

(The Pastor sings) “Deck the halls with boughs of holly -- fa la la la la, la la la la!”
Tis the season to be jolly -- fa la la la la, la la la la!” (If you were watching this on television with the volume set on “mute”, the caption appearing across the screen would probably read, “sung by the Pastor in a beautiful baritone voice” – or perhaps not.)

This is supposedly the season to be jolly. In my own experience, however, I must confess that jolly begins to wear thin under the pressures of secular, commercial Christmas, particularly the onslaught of the ubiquitous Christmas music that assails me as I wend my way through shopping malls. Over the years I have developed a deep and abiding hatred for the chipmunks, not the chipmunks *per se* (they’re actually kind of cute), but the chipmunks’ covers of some of my favorite Christmas carols. The only carol I hate worse than the chipmunks is the barking dogs’ rendition of “Jingle Bells.”

As you know, I don’t tend to do jolly, though I confess that I make an extra effort at Christmas. Unbeknownst to me at the time I exchanged wedding vows with my wife forty-four years ago I had unwittingly agreed to spend every Christmas afternoon and evening at Aunt Margaret and Uncle George’s house in Boston. I really didn’t mind spending Christmas day with my wife’s family. In fact, the only thing I ever complained about was Uncle George’s punch.

Uncle George, God rest his soul, was a great guy. His one fixed delusion had to do with his Christmas punch, which he thought everyone liked. Uncle George’s punch, the recipe for which he treasured, was somewhere between 90 and 120 proof. You could actually use it as a paint remover, as we discovered one Christmas when a little bit accidentally spilled on one of Aunt Margaret’s Louis XIV tables. It was the worst

tasting punch I have ever drunk. Uncle George was so proud of it, however, that I couldn't bring myself to tell him that no one really liked it.

I thought of Uncle George's punch ten years ago as our trekking group was drinking heavily salted yak butter tea in a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. In response to my colleagues' comment that it was the worst thing they had ever tasted, I told them they hadn't tasted Uncle George's punch. I suspect my ability to not only drink Uncle George's punch but also appear to like it so I wouldn't offend the host helped me get down the heavily salted yak butter tea, which, by the way, is also an acquired taste.

After four or five glasses of Uncle George's punch, I came as close as I have probably ever come to the experience of being jolly. My children, however, have told me that I wasn't being jolly; I was actually being goofy.

There is nothing wrong with being jolly at Christmas time. There is nothing wrong with being in good spirits, being cheerful, merry, or convivial, especially if we can do it without the assistance of Uncle George's punch or some better tasting alternative. There is nothing wrong with decorating our houses, sending cards and buying gifts for those we love. However, this is not what Christmas is all about. Christmas is not about jolly; it is about joy, and there is a difference between feeling jolly and experiencing joy.

One problem with the directive to be jolly is that it occasionally runs up against our true emotions during the Christmas season. It can lead us to pass judgment on ourselves for not feeling happy. For many of us, especially those of us who have lost loved ones, Christmas may bring a mix of feelings, a mix of memories. We may feel sad thinking about loved ones who have moved away or are no longer present as we gather around the tree or the Christmas table. Christmas is not about a jolly that borders on goofy. It is much deeper than that.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Each Sunday of Advent we light one of the candles on our Advent wreath and reflect on the gift symbolized by that candle. This morning, as Anne and Lila Mato lit the candle of joy, we prayed that we might

experience joy in this holiday season. I believe we can experience joy even when we don't feel particularly jolly. If we experience true joy, we can experience it even in the midst of hardship, even in the midst of physical and emotional suffering.

I believe that joy is our experience of God's presence in our world. To use a spatial metaphor, joy occurs at the intersection of the vertical dimension of life, the spiritual dimension, the dimension of the eternal, with the horizontal dimension, the secular dimension, the dimension of the temporal. This intersection did not just happen as a singular event two thousand years ago; it is always happening. God is breaking into our world and into our lives in this very moment. If we are conscious of this presence we experience joy.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when the wise men saw that the star had stopped, "they were overwhelmed with joy." Scripture does not tell us that they were happy. It does not tell us they were jolly. The wise men experienced God's presence. They realized they were standing at the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal. Even though, from the symbolism of the third gift, they knew that the life of this child and his mother would be touched by suffering, they were still overwhelmed with joy.

According to the Gospel of Luke the angel tells the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." The angel did not say that everyone would be happy, jolly, or even pleased at the coming of Jesus. Some people ignored it; some refused to accept it; some were actually threatened by it. If we open our hearts to this gift, then we, like the shepherds, will experience joy.

Jesus associates joy with our experience of the kingdom of God. He tells us,

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)

Our experience of the kingdom of God, the experience of God's presence both within and among us, is an experience of joy.

Paul tells us that the experience of joy is inextricably intertwined with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The presence and the power of the Holy Spirit helps us help us carry the burdens that life places on our shoulders. As Paul tells us,

. . . suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-4)

The experience of joy, even in the midst of suffering, is the experience of God's presence, God's love, which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. It can awaken the light of peace, hope, and a quiet joy that counters the darkness of angry, bitter, cynicism.

The hymn that we will sing at the close of our worship this morning: "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," was written by George Matheson on the eve of his sister's marriage. His whole family had gone to the wedding and left him alone. Out of his loneliness he wrote of something that had caused him immense spiritual anguish.

Years before, Matheson was engaged to be married. When his fiancé learned that he was going blind and there was nothing the doctors could do, she broke off their engagement, telling him that she could not go through life with a blind man. Matheson did go blind while studying for the Christian ministry. However, his sister faithfully stayed with him and took care of him. Now, on the eve of his sister's marriage, he realized that the one who had taken care of him for many years, like his fiancé, was leaving him for another man.

Matheson had apparently been a brilliant student. It is said that if he had not gone blind he could have been the leader of the Church of Scotland in his day. He wrote a learned work entitled *The Growth of the Spirit of Christianity*. Critics hailed it as brilliant, but flawed. When they pointed out his mistakes he was heartbroken. One of his friends wrote, "When he saw that for the purposes of scholarship his blindness was a fatal hindrance, he withdrew from the field – not without pangs, but finally."

Matheson, with the assistance of his sister, had turned to the pastoral ministry where he regularly preached to a congregation of over 1,500. Now that his sister was married and gone, what was he to do? Who would care for him, a blind man?

It was probably because his heart was opened through this great sadness and despair that the Lord gave him the words to this hymn, which he wrote in five minutes. Looking back over his life he realized that his was “an obstructed life, a circumscribed life, but a life of quenchless hopefulness, a life that has beaten persistently against the cage of circumstance, and which even at the time of abandoned work has not said ‘Good night’ but rather ‘Good morning’”.

It was out of this sense of “quenchless hopefulness” in the midst of a bleak future that he discovered (or was given as a gift from God) what he describes as “the joy that seekest me through pain,” a joy to which he could not close his heart. Out of this experience of joy in the midst of pain came the words, “I trace the rainbow in the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be.”

I think that George Matheson is telling us that even when the skies are darkening and threaten to flood both us and the world, if we look, we can glimpse the rainbow through the rain, the rainbow of hope, the rainbow that is the symbol of God’s covenant with us. This experience, when we have it through the grace of God and our own faith, brings the kind of joy that is an integral part of the experience of Christmas.

In Galatians 5:22, Paul ties joy to the other fruits of the Spirit. He tells us, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” If we live a life marked by patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and love, no matter what burdens we carry, we will experience the peace that passes all understanding. In my experience, joy is the emotion that accompanies our realization of these gifts.

Jolly is good. There is nothing wrong with jolly, especially in the Christmas season. However, it is just a little sad if all we have is jolly. Joy is a lot more than jolly.

Joy is a spiritual experience, the experience of God's in-breaking, God's incarnation, God's presence in our lives.

As we pass the light of our candle to the person sitting next to us on Christmas Eve, when we see our beautiful sanctuary bathed in the light of those candles and when we join in the singing of "Silent Night," we just might experience a quiet feeling of joy. The experience of jolly can fade as quickly as the effects of Uncle George's punch. The experience of joy has much more staying power. It can last throughout the year. It can sustain us even in the darkest moments of our lives.

In a world that is tinged with darkness, in the midst of the struggles and losses of our own lives, I wish you not a jolly holly Christmas, but a Christmas filled with hope, peace, love, and a quiet joy.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
December 11, 2011*

*O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O light that foll'west all my way, I yield my flick'ring torch to thee; I
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day I
May brighter, fairer be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head, I dare not ask to fly from thee; I
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red I
Life that shall endless be.*