

Sermon – Sharing in God’s Joy
Sunday February 12, 2023

The last time I preached, I asked you, *What brings you joy?*

I said that shawarma brings me joy - especially if it’s from a place called Shawarma Palace in Ottawa. That week, many of you sent me pictures of your shawarmas.

You guys inspired me so much that last week I did it. I made the 4 hour drive to Ottawa and here I am in my happy place. **[Show picture]**

Today, I have a different question for you. Instead of *What brings you joy?* Who is someone you love and *What brings them joy?*

My wife Joanne loves travelling, having fun and hanging out with friends and family, but she captures every moment with a photo.

We have many family Christmas traditions. But a few years ago, Jo found a place in Vaughan where you can take a family photo with Santa for free. So for the past few years, we’ve been doing that every Christmas.

Last Christmas, without telling us Jo booked our family for a photo shoot. My girls are teenagers now. So they’ll say no if they don’t want to do something. And at that time we were all super busy!

I know I didn’t want to make the 40 minute drive each way in traffic. And I knew my kids didn’t either.

But a strange thing happened. When Jo asked them if they wanted to go, do you know what they said? They said, Yes, we’ll go. We don’t really want to but we’ll do it. When Jo asked them why, they said Because we know how much joy it will give you.

As a father, hearing this just made me so... what’s the word? ... annoyed. Because if I say I don’t want to go now, I look like a total scumbag - thanks a lot kids!

Here’s the thing. Isn’t it amazing how love will make you go out of your way to bring someone joy? And when you see their face light up, you light up too! You share in their joy and your relationship grows.

We’re in a series called *The Joy of the Lord is our Strength*. Each week, we’ve been unpacking a different aspect of biblical joy.

We’re also Making Space for Joy in our small groups. We’re encouraging all our groups to practice joy together. If you’re in a small group, you’ve already received emails with lots of ideas.

But just email me a photo of what your group is doing and we’ll enter you in a draw. On February 28, we’ll announce the winner and give out prizes. One or two groups will win a Pizza Party for your next small group meeting!

Here’s how one small group Made Space for Joy. **[Show picture]**

Just to let you know, that group also brought pizza and wings for the staff which brought us a lot of joy. So send me your photos (and bribes!) and have fun Making Space for Joy in your group!

There's a lot to celebrate because later in the second service, we have a baptism. But right now, we're going to wrap up our series on joy. In this series, we've been looking at how *we* experience joy. But today, we're going to look at it from another perspective. We're going to look at how *God* experiences joy. What I want to do today is look at, What brings God joy and How does he invite us to share in his joy.

Our Bible Passage today is in Luke 15.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

These opening verses give us the context for today's passage. The religious leaders are indignant because Jesus is eating with sinners. So what's the big deal?

These people are the morally offensive people in society. In that culture, table fellowship is a sign of friendship. So by eating with them, Jesus is accepting them as friends.

That's why the religious leaders are angry. Because for them, this compromises their righteousness and status as God's people.

So how does Jesus respond? He tells three parables. Three parables that make an important point. Three parables that end with celebrations of joy.

The first two parables are similar. In the first one, a shepherd has 100 sheep but he loses one of them. So he says, Well it's only one sheep and I have 99 left. I'll just leave it to get eaten by wolves.

Is that what he does? No. So what does he do? He leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one. And when he finds it, what does he do? He *joyfully* puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he says, '**Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.**' (v. 6)

Jesus then makes this point, **I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.** (v. 7)

The second parable is similar. A woman has ten silver coins but loses one of them; it's the equivalent of a day's wages. So what does she do?

So does a cost-benefit analysis. She figures, It will actually cost me more in time, resources and opportunity cost to look for that coin than it's actually worth. I'm better off writing it off and investing the other coins.

Is that what she does? No. So what does she do? She lights a lamp, gets down on her knees and searches her house until she finds the coin. And when she finds it, she says, '**Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.**' (v. 9)

Then Jesus says, **In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** (v. 10)

So what's the point of these parables? The point is this: There's great joy when something that was lost is found. When a shepherd finds his sheep, when a woman finds her coin.

And this is the joy God feels when one sinner repents. Jesus then tells a third parable to show what it looks like.

This third parable is the most famous of all Jesus' parables. It's a parable of God's love, forgiveness and joy. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son but a better name would be the Parable of the Loving Father because it's really about the father's love and his joy at his son's return.

There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. (vv. 11-12)

In that culture, the younger son was entitled to a third of the family estate. He would have received this at his father's death. But here's the thing – his father is still alive. So to ask this while his father's still living is like saying, I wish you were dead!

This was extremely disrespectful. Don't forget, this is a patriarchal society with a strong honour-shame culture. This would have brought great shame not only to the father, but to the family and community as well.

So how does the father respond to this insult? Amazingly, he gives his son what he wants.

The younger son then moves out and lives the party lifestyle. But after awhile, he runs out of money and is desperate. So he takes a menial job feeding pigs – something no self-respecting Jew would ever do. He's so close to starvation, he considers eating the food the pigs eat.

So here's the son. He's hit rock-bottom. He's wondering what to do. Then he thinks about his father and decides to go back home. He says to himself,

I'm going to go back to my father and apologize. I'm going to tell him I don't deserve to be your son but if you'll have me, I'll be your servant.

Then he sets off for home.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him... (v. 20)

And what does the father do? What does he do to his son who disrespected him and shamed him?

- Does he send servants out to beat him?
- Does he make his son beg for forgiveness?
- Does he force him to work until the entire debt is paid?

What does he do?

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (v. 20)

No one would have expected this response. They would have expected the father to respond with extreme anger but instead the father responds with complete joy! He welcomes his son home with open arms and a celebratory feast. But why the celebration?

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. (v. 24)

The sheer intensity of the father's joy is a huge shock. But it's designed to give us a glimpse of what brings God joy. Because God's joy tells us three things about his heart. Because I'm a preacher, these three things all start with the letter 'E'.

First, **God is eager to forgive.**

Have you ever hurt someone then got the silent treatment? Isn't that the worst?

Now when you hurt God, does God ever give you the silent treatment?

Not according to this. Because like the younger son, after you've hurt God and walked away from him, what's he doing? He's waiting for you. He's scanning the horizon. He's hoping you'll come home.

And when he sees the smallest sign that your heart is turning back, what does he do? He forgets his dignity and comes running to you! He's so full of joy, he throws himself on you and doesn't even give you a chance to apologize.

But you tell him, I know I don't deserve this. I know I messed up. I know I've hurt a lot of people. After everything I've done, I don't deserve your love.

But before you can finish, God puts a robe on you that's reserved for distinguished guests. He puts the family ring on your finger. He gives you sandals for your feet.

What's the significance of these things?

The robe, the ring and the sandals are symbols. They're symbols that God is honouring you as his beloved son and daughter. They're symbols that God is restoring you back into the family. They're symbols that God is making you an heir.

You see, God doesn't give you the silent treatment. His forgiveness is total and immediate. No grudges or resentment because the past is washed away by his joy.

Because of what Jesus did for you on the cross, your debt has been forgiven.

**as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
(Psalm 103:12)**

God is eager to forgive.

Second, the father's joy tells us that **God is extravagant in his grace.**

In the story, the younger son doesn't even expect to be restored as a son. His only hope is to be a slave in his father's household.

Rabbinic law made provision for an offender to be restored to the community. It was a humbling process that involved paying the victim back.

But the father is so full of joy he doesn't care about that. Instead, he restores his son back into the family and makes him an heir right away. That's grace. Grace is giving you what you don't deserve. Do you realize that...

- We should be fasting in repentance but God gives us a fattened calf.

- We should be mourning in sack cloth but God gives us a new robe to wear.
- We should be dusted in ashes but God gives us a ring to put on.
- We should be weeping in repentance but God throws us a party and invites us to rejoice.

That's grace.

Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (vv. 23-24)

Jesus talked a lot about feasts in describing the kingdom of God.

- He said that people from the east and west would sit down and feast with Abraham in his kingdom.
- He said that the kingdom of God is like a wedding feast given by the king for his son.
- He said that one day when he comes back to restore his kingdom there will be a what? A feast.

So what's the significance of a feast? A feast is a celebration of God's good gifts.

But for God, there's also another purpose. Because a feast is an invitation to intimacy. God wants to share his joy with you, his love with you, his very self with you. God invites you to laugh with him, celebrate with him and enjoy the gifts he wants to bless you with.

Because God is extravagant in his grace.

Third, the father's joy tells us **God is excited to celebrate the "small" things.**

Did you notice - when does God celebrate? Does he wait til all the problems in the world have been solved, human suffering has ended and everyone has been converted?

No. God celebrates when one sheep comes back, when one coin has been found, when one child comes home. This is enough to bring God from his throne room, running to his child and filling the heavens with his divine joy.

We're not used to that. We're not used to celebrating small things. We're used to celebrating big things: big numbers, big milestones, big accomplishments.

And yet that's not how God celebrates. God celebrates the small things. He gives himself totally to joy when a single child returns.

What does that mean for us? It means that we can hope and pray for big things but we also need to celebrate the small things.

- One hidden act of repentance
- One small gesture of love
- One act of forgiveness

Do the people in your life feel celebrated when God's kingdom breaks through? Do they feel your joy when they do the small things that make God smile?

God celebrates the "small" things.

God is a God of joy. His joy is so great he can't keep it to himself. That's why he throws a feast. It's an invitation to intimacy. He wants to share his joy with you and me. So how do you share in God's joy?

If you're the younger son, **Come home to your Father's love.**

Maybe you're off in a distant land. You've chased after things you thought would fill you but your heartbroken and disillusioned instead. Come home to your Father's love.

He's waiting for you. Scanning the horizon for you. Hoping you'll come home.

- He's longing to run to you with open arms.
- He's longing to forgive you and restore you.
- He's longing to give you new life and a new start.

Will you come home to your Father's love?

If you're the older son, **Put away resentment and enter into your Father's joy.**

At the end of the story, the older son comes home from the fields. He learns that his rebellious younger brother has come home. He learns that he's being celebrated instead of being punished.

So he's angry. He refuses to go in. He forces his father to come out and plead with him - which is a huge insult. He then not only refuses to go in but publicly criticizes his father heaping more insult to injury.

Outwardly, the older brother has done everything right: he's hardworking, obedient and dutiful. But inwardly, it's a different story. Inwardly, he's bitter, judgmental and unforgiving. The older brother is the Pharisees and religious leaders.

He may not have wandered off like his younger brother, but like his brother he's also lost. He's also a sinner. He's also in need of forgiveness.

Maybe you're the older son.

Henri Nouwen says that older sons obey God to get things from God not to get God himself. They perform to impress God, but they don't really know him, love him or delight in him.

If you're an older son, the father's pleading with you to join the celebration. To come to him not to get things from God but to get God himself. To celebrate your brothers and sisters who have also found their way home.

Will you put away your resentment and enter into your Father's joy?

But whether you're the younger son or the older son, you and I are invited to share in God's joy by **Love others like our Heavenly Father loves them.**

This story is really an invitation to be like the Father. To show the same compassion your Heavenly Father has shown you. When you come home to the father, he invites you to love others the way he does: joyfully welcoming rebellious and resentful sinners alike.

Jesus is the perfect example of this. He said, Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How was he like the Father? He loved the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus loved the Pharisees and the hypocrites. Jesus loved them like the Father loves them and he invites us to follow his example.

So how do you share in God's joy?

Join the celebration. Become like the Father. Love others as your Heavenly Father has loved you.

Jesus said, Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. (Luke 6:36)

This is what brings God joy.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you this story. Thank you for this glimpse into your unfailing love that waits for us, scans the horizon for us and runs to us when we come home. Thank you for this glimpse into your immense joy – how you laugh and celebrate when a child who was lost comes home.

Some of us here have wandered away. We've made a mess of our lives and we're lost, confused and hurting. Some of us have never left. On the outside we're doing all the right things but on the inside we're empty, bitter and disillusioned.

Maybe some of you here this morning have never given your life to Jesus. You've never received the love and the joy God wants to give you. With everyone's eyes closed, if you sense God is speaking to your heart and inviting you to come home to his love, would you raise your hand?

And now, in solidarity with everyone in the room, let's join our hearts and pray this prayer together.
Repeat after me:

Heavenly father, thank you for Jesus and for the cross. Cleanse me from my sins. Make me brand new. Fill me with your spirit so I can be like the Father and love others the way you have loved me. Thank you for new life, I give you all of mine.

In Jesus name

Amen