

JOY

July 16, 2023

Story:

Last weekend I packed up a sleeping bag, my headlamp, a few changes of clothes, a bunch of sunscreen and bug spray, and headed into the middle of Algonquin Park on a 3 day canoe trip with a group of six teenagers. These teens were a part of the Leaders in Training program at Pioneer Camp. Now some of you are currently thinking about what a beautiful weekend that must have been... and the majority of you are wondering if I have completely lost my mind and questioning who would ever willingly volunteer to do this! Now let me tell you, I had a lovely time!

The trip started off as many do – good, but hard. Our first day involved a short portage and a 14k paddle across lakes and rivers into the heart of Algonquin. The teens did a great job, but by the end of the day the sunburns were already stinging (despite huge amounts of sunscreen), they were swollen from bug bites, arms were tired, their feet were wet, steering a canoe full of gear was harder than anyone thought, they missed their friends who had gone on other trips, they were struggling with not knowing the plans or what time it was, and they were having a hard time understanding that everything we had eaten and would eat had a bit of dirt (or camp spice) in it. The team was working well together, and slowly getting to know each other, but the conversations were quiet and people were having a hard time getting their footing in this new and uncertain place.

They woke up the next day tired from rocks and roots under their mats and the sounds of the woods keeping them awake, but they were ready for the day – and it was a great one! We canoed, learned new skills, told stories, sang songs, laughed, prayed together, and enjoyed God's creation and each other's company. And that night as we sat on the rocks eating rice burnt beyond recognition, I quietly listened to this group of teens recount their day, laughing with each other, encouraging each other, joking with each other, and delighting in their teammates.

Soon we headed back to our tents and I sat there with the sounds of the forest and the gentle rain on the tarp, listening to a bunch of teens laugh harder than I had heard them laugh before. Now looking at the overall situation, you probably would not expect a lot of joy in this place. This group of teens was tired, hungry, sunburnt, bug bitten, sore, and covered in dirt, in a completely new and largely uncomfortable place where they had to give up a lot of control. To further things, this was a mismatched group of teens who probably would never have talked to each other, much less become friends, if they hadn't been grouped together for this trip. But, I

sat there and listened to the endless giggles spread from tent to tent and erupt into beautiful laughter – I listened to the joy that these teens were experiencing.

Despite things being uncomfortable, this group was able to step away from distractions, expectations, established friendships, into the simplicity and complexity of this unknown place. A place where God met each of them, drew them together, drew them closer to him, gave them a common goal, and allowed them to find such great joy in each other and in his creation. And as I sat that night listening to this group of young leaders laugh, joke, encourage, and share stories – I smiled so wide as I felt that deep joy bubble up inside of me. It was an absolute gift.

This was joy in a very unlikely place, but that's just where joy normally shows up!

Intro:

We currently are in a series on the "Fruit of the Spirit" where we will explore the 9 relationally-oriented character fruits that mark a flourishing life. These nine fruits are key characteristics of God that the Holy Spirit produces in each of us and in our lives. Last week Pastor Andrew explored the first of the Fruit of the Spirit, Love, and today we get to dive into one of my most favourite things – Joy!

Definition:

So when I say the word joy what comes to mind? When I asked someone the other day what this means, without skipping a beat he blurted out, "Just having a good time!" This tends to be the focus of our world most of the time. Our world says that joy is all about having a good time, having what we want, it comes from things going well. We strive for success, for wealth, for title, for things, for relationships. It's focused and dependant on getting what we desire – what are we striving after. If we just get that promotion or raise, buy the newest device, get along well with the people around us, then these things will bring us joy – and they likely do... for a time.

If you look in the dictionary, it defines joy as, "**The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires (Merriam Webster).**" But then the question is... what happens when we don't succeed, when things don't go well, when we don't get what we desire? When these things fail, the feeling of joy fades quickly.

But the joy that we are talking about today is different, vastly different. Biblical joy isn't about our earthly wants and desires. It's about desiring God and what God desires. It's about freely and fully following a God who loves us, knows us, delights in us, and fills us with a true joy that can only be found in him. Mary Clark Moschella explains joy by saying, "**Joy comes down to this: to being awake and fully alive, aware of the love and goodness of God and mindful of the wondrous gift of life.**"

Biblical joy is beautifully interwoven in the narrative of the Bible. From the very beginning of the Bible through to the very end we see joy as being central to God's character and as an attribute of his people. We see a God of joy in joyful relationship with his people. We see Jesus living a life that modeled beautiful, genuine, relational joy as he healed people, restored people, and rejoiced with them time and time again. We see the Holy Spirit filling God's people with joy and binding community together. **As a fruit of the Spirit, joy is at the heart of God's character, modeled by Jesus, and is produced in us through the Holy Spirit.**

So how does this Biblical joy differ from the dictionary definition? Biblical Joy is not about success, good fortune, or circumstances; joy comes from the confidence in God and his promises. It's the response to the presence and work of God in our lives. Joy isn't about possessing the earthly things we desire, it's about freely and authentically taking delight in things beyond ourselves, in the blessings and love of Jesus.

Joy isn't about looking just at our own story, it's about being in relationship and loving community with God and his people. God's heart is for the restoration of his creation – he longs for things to be right again, to be the way that he designed them to be. For our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with creation to be restored in to the perfect rightness that he designed - this rightness is what we call Shalom, or flourishing. And when God's creation, us included, are flourishing, there is incredible joy! And this joy is a beautiful preview of what is to come when God restores perfect shalom, rightness, and flourishing in our world. And we can find great joy in the certainty of that promise.

Wow! That's a beautiful thing! An incredible thing. But here's the trick... it is far easier said than done... What about when things are hard? When things we hoped for don't work out? When things feel like they're falling apart? Finding joy in those places is really hard and sometimes feels impossible.

So what does true, genuine, Biblical joy look like practically and how can we experience this joy even in hard times? We are going to explore this challenge by looking at three different pieces of joy – proximity, perspective, and purpose.

Proximity: Joy comes from God and through God.

We were created in the image of a joyful God and joy comes from being close to our creator. In order for joy to be a part of our lives, we have to know who God is and rest in the truth that we belong to him. Like the vine and the branches in John 15, the closer we are to God, the more we will reflect his character and the more the Holy Spirit will produce the fruit of joy in our lives.

As we move into closer proximity to our loving God, our vision becomes clearer. Our desires move away from earthly wants and we begin to desire God and the things that he

desires. **God, his love, and his work in and through us becomes both the source and object of our joy and produces joy in our lives.** And when we remain in close proximity to God we are able to see his work in and through our lives.

But the question remains, what about when things are hard? Paul gives us a great model for this in Philippians. We find Paul imprisoned because of his faith; he has lost everything, is chained to a guard, and possibly facing death. From here he writes a letter to the Philippian church that is just dripping with joy! In just 104 verses, the idea of joy and rejoicing is mentioned 16 times! In chapter one Paul expresses joy in the church (Phil 1;3-5) and that God's name is being spoken about (Phil 1:18). In chapter two, he rejoices in the work that God is doing (Phil 2:12-14). In chapter three he shares the joy that God's promises of heaven are true (Phil 3:20), and the list goes on and on. Despite all things, he pleads with the church to, "rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice! (4:4)"

So what allows Paul to hold tight to joy in the midst of such hardship? His proximity to God. He explains, "**What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (3:8-9).**" He claims the truth of who God is and knows that despite all things, faith in God is the most important. In one of the lowest earthly places, he positions himself close to Jesus, and this is where he finds joy.

We cannot find true joy in anything other than Jesus. This genuine joy allows us to be fully free in the presence of God no matter in what circumstances we find ourselves in. To freely take delight in God's love, people, and work in our world. It allows us to come fully to Jesus, to those around us, in full honesty of where we are at. Allowing for authentic relationship, connection, and intimacy with God and his people.

Perspective: Joy comes from the confidence that in all things, God is on the throne.

Joy is the correct response to the presence and work of God. It's having confidence that he is who he says he is, that we are his children, and that he is at work. Joy comes from the confidence that in all things, despite all things, God is on the throne. The Bible Project talks about joy as, "**An attitude God's people adapt, not because of their circumstance, but because of God's hope and promises.**"

This perspective is what allows joy to exist even in the hard spaces. Have you ever been in the middle of something really hard and someone says, "It could be worse!"? It's frustrating and usually not helpful. But this shift of perspective is not about looking at our challenges and saying, "Others have it worse" – it's about looking at our challenges and seeing that God is right there with us, that he is fighting for us, and that he has promised to work things for our good.

It's about looking at the challenge and knowing that in this moment, I'm okay because God is who he says he is. It's about shifting our gaze from our circumstances and refocusing on Jesus. It's about having absolute confidence in God and his promises. Knowing that what he has promised us is true. That he is in control. That he will never leave us or forsake us. That he will work things for our good. That he will restore even the most broken places of our world, our lives. That we are loved and valued far beyond what we can understand. Joy comes from knowing that he is still on the throne.

And here's the thing, God doesn't just allow us to experience a joyful feeling in the middle of hard things, he promises that he will use even the hardest things to *produce* joy in our lives. James 1:2 says, **“Consider it pure joy my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”** God will use even the hardest things grow us, shape us, refine us, and lead us to a place of joy and flourishing.

This shift in perspective allows us to accept that joy and hardship can, and often, exist in the same space. We have talked a lot about the refreshing, genuine, beauty of Biblical joy, and we also have talked about the reality of hardship, of sorrow, of pain. Both of these spaces are very real and true. Both of these spaces exist and we must recognize that they are never really mutually exclusive. They always exist in tension, and this tension is where Jesus often meets us. This ability to hold joy and sorrow in tension is a hard one, and one that I have wrestled with time and time again and am wrestling with right now. But it's a lesson God continues to reveal to me in beautiful places and through beloved people.

I am forever grateful that God has allowed me to visit some beautiful places in this world and meet with incredible people. What I have come to see time and time again is that those on the margins, those who have less, those who are vulnerable, are often incredibly gifted in finding joy in the midst of hardship. They are well experienced in focusing their gaze on Jesus even when everything around them looks bleak. They are so good at holding tightly to the promise that God will show up and provide what is needed.

Some of the most joyful people I have ever met are the people who live in incredible hardship. I love a beautiful community of people on the other side of the world, a community that would be considered, economically speaking, one of the poorest areas of one of the poorest nations in the world. A few years ago I got to take part in a project where we visited homes and listened to stories. For weeks we listened to stories day after day after day of incredible loss, grief, hardship, challenge, and injustice. We visited homes destroyed by fire and floods, families broken by disease and injury, whole communities who didn't have clean water or enough to eat, lives destroyed by violence. But even in the midst of such hardship, every story had a stronger theme! Every family told stories of joy! At every home we were greeted with smiles, singing, dancing, hugs, and handshakes. We were often welcomed for meals and what little was had was shared. We heard countless stories of how God showed up, provided what was needed, protected, guided, and gave peace even in the hard. We talked, prayed, danced, sang, played, and laughed! This was joy beyond circumstance; this joy was in the

confidence of God's promises. This was joy of sharing stories and meals and community. This was true joy.

It's not about the challenge, it's about knowing God will be present even in the challenge. It's about knowing that he has showed up before and that he will do it again. It's about allowing and inviting joy into hard places and holding these things in beautiful tension as we shift our perspective to Jesus.

Purpose: Joy comes from God's beautiful mission to restore the flourishing of creation and community.

We've now looked at the importance of both proximity to God and shifting our perspective to Jesus. The next piece is our purpose. Our purpose, first and foremost, is to be with Jesus. To lean in, to step aside from busyness, to actively look for him, and rejoice in his goodness.

We know that our world is full of brokenness, but God's mission is to seek restoration, rightness, and the flourishing of his creation and he takes great delight when his creation is working the way it was designed to work. This is God's mission, but he lovingly invites us in. Our purpose is to be with Jesus and be a part of his mission and when we do this we flourish and see the flourishing of others.

As we widen our circles, step into new places, and do the things God puts in front of us, we are going to experience him more and more, see him work, and rejoice in what he is doing. We are going to "taste and see that the Lord is good (ps 34:8)" and that leads to joy. **Joy comes from seeing God at work in the world and joining with him.** God invites us into this mission together as his people, his church. Joy both leads us into purposeful community and meets us in these communities.

So, the last couple of years have been a little crazy! It's often hard to look back at these years and see a lot of joy. For all of us, things shifted, things didn't go as planned, and for many of us without jobs, hobbies, friends, we lost a sense of purpose. But in the midst of this crazy mess, I saw this community come together with a beautiful focus and purpose. I saw people lean in to what God calls us to do and do whatever they could to extend love and seek the flourishing of our community even in the midst of hard things.

I have seen individuals and families make tens of thousands of sandwiches, baked goods, and meals for our friends who live on the streets. I have seen people donate their time to pick up groceries, drive to appointments, and talk with people on the phone. I have seen thousands of care bags and handwritten notes being passed to long term care homes, neighbours, and people who were working really hard to care for others. I have seen our Pantry work tirelessly to meet the rising need for food support in our community. I have seen

volunteers tenderly caring for, praying with, and cheering on our friends who live on the streets. And as we reopened and things have returned to a bit more normalcy, I have seen our building open our doors wide again and this community invite and welcome people in with such love, care, and joy. We have shared meals together on Thursdays, played sports and games, welcomed campers, met as groups, and hosted events. I've seen teams rush back to our partners in Roatan, Thunder Bay, and Nicaragua. And every Sunday we get to come together as a community and worship our God! I've seen so many of you welcoming people into our parking lot and building, pouring into our youth and children, serving refreshments, leading us in worship, working in production and sound, and joining in the mission of God's work here. In every room of this building we get to worship, learn, serve, love, encourage, pour into others, and be poured into ourselves.

And you know what I feel when I look at all of these things – incredible, beautiful, holy joy. And I hope you feel the same! We often say that we at Cornerstone are a “whoohoo church” and I think it's very true! We are a church that is full of joy and as we strive, both individually and as a community to follow our God of joy, I cannot wait to see how he continues to grow the fruit of joy in and through us!

So here's the challenge I want to leave you with this week – a challenge that I am taking on as well. These are a few simple practices to adapt day by day to pursue true joy in our lives.

- **Know:** Know who God is and who you are in relationship to you. Know that you are seen, valued, and fully loved by a God who takes great delight in you. Know that the promises that God makes us are true. Know that there is joy in his presence. Find a way to remind yourself of these things.
- **Abide:** Find time to step aside, even for a moment, to stop, to lean in and pay attention to what God is doing. Look for the places where he is working. Freely take delight in how he is working in your life and in the lives of those around you. Take a few moments each day to intentionally sit with Jesus and look at what he is doing.
- **Praise:** Make space for rejoicing in the blessings God gives us. List the things that you are thankful for, praise him for his love, find time for worship. Take intentional time to write these things down, to sing, to talk to others about God's goodness. To dwell in the blessings that God has given you.

Friends, our God is a God of joy who lovingly fills us with true and genuine joy. As we strive to remain in close proximity to our joyful God, keep our perspective fixed on him, and live in the purpose that he gives us, he is going to fill us with joy and allow us to rejoice in all things.

Benediction: Romans 15:13 - May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

One liner: As we strive to remain in close proximity to our joyful God, keep our perspective fixed on him, and live in the purpose that he gives us, he is going to fill us with joy and allow us to rejoice in all things.

Summary:

Our world says that joy is all about having a good time, having what we want, and that it comes from things going well. Even the dictionary defines joy as, “The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires (Merriam Webster).” But then the question is, what happens when we don’t succeed, when things don’t go well, when we don’t get what we desire? When these things fail, the feeling of joy fades quickly.

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