

Ladies' Prayer Brunch
Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
March 4, 2017

Women of Joy: We are enough

Women of Joy. What a wonderful theme for today. It's such a blessing to be here, to enjoy this wonderful brunch (Cheryl), the delightful music (Paige and Loretta, with more to come), this time of fellowship, and the bond that we share as women in Christ.

I imagine just getting here today could have been a scramble for some of us. Coordination of schedules and commitments involving work, children, spouses, extended families, or even our pets — but we made it! Thank you for taking some time to be in community and a thanks to all who planned and worked and helped to make this time happen. So sit back and take a deep breath — really, a deep, cleansing breath. We need this pause, this time to rejuvenate and begin to recognize that we truly are, as sisters in Christ, women of joy.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines joy as the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing one's desires. It's delight. Joy can also be an expression of emotion, like gaiety, or a state of happiness. It's bliss.

And all that is true. But there's something more, something different, about Christian joy. It's more than an emotion or a feeling.

Christian joy is deeper. It's the joy that touches our heart and mind and soul, and it's rooted in faith, firmly grounded in our lives in Christ.

Christian joy is that lasting, deep-seated confidence and hope, as we discover God's joy in us, as God's beloved children: a gift of love, freely given.

God's joy in us. We don't typically spend a lot of our day-to-day thinking that God delights in us.

But this too is truth. For God intentionality created each one of us and we are a source of joy and delight.

Remember back to the story of Creation, one of the Bible stories we've heard and studied since we were children. We learned about God creating everything that is, and on the 6th day, when God saw all that had been made, God declared that was it very good, and on the 7th day, God rested.

It probably wouldn't surprise you that I'm a nerd and like to read different English translations and commentaries of the Bible. And I particularly like the introduction in the CEB Women's Bible, the Common English Bible, to the first Genesis creation story: a cosmic and powerful God who makes the world and everything in it. There's an order (I do love organization and order!) to this entire enterprise: God creates by speaking and by dividing things: separating order from chaos, light from darkness, dry land from sea. Things is the created order have their place and God's order keeps chaos at bay.

As humans come into the world on the last day, what could be considered the high point of creation, and they are created together, “male and female God created them,” “in God’s own image”.

We have been made in the image of God. We should hear in these words that we are creative partners with God and with one other, sustaining the created order. We’ve been placed on this earth to be in relationship with God, with one another, and to care for God’s creation.

We have purpose. God was intentional in creating us, in creating women. And God not only delights in us as God’s own creation, but God knows us.

Cassie read for us part of Psalm 139 (one of my favorites), reminding us that God knows when we sit down and rise up. God discerns our thoughts from afar and is always with us to lead us, to hold us. God knit us together in our mother’s wombs and we are marvelously made, loved since before we could ever do anything. And I’d like to emphasize that word *do*...loved us before we could *do* anything

God’s joy is in us, God delights in us, freely giving us love.

God’s love is a gift. I imagine that, for many of us, this can be the hardest concept for us to grab onto, accept, and fully absorb into our beings — both as women, and as members of our society, for we do live in an individualistic, pull-ourselves-up-by-our-own-bootstraps kind of culture. It’s hard to escape feeling we need to earn our place in the world, even earn the right to be loved.

But God’s love is not something we need to wait for, or work for, or earn.

Remember back to the story of Jesus’ baptism, when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River and God’s voice is heard from heaven saying, “This is my beloved, with whom I’m well pleased.” In these words we hear God’s delight in Jesus.

These words aren’t said because Jesus has been out doing good works or that he deserved to be beloved of God. He hasn’t yet gone into the wilderness, or developed some fuller understanding of God’s love, or even a clear picture of the next steps in his mission. All that is still to come. Yet God delights in Jesus.

We are part of the body of Christ. We carry that God-spark, the light of our Lord and Savior, and these words — that God is well pleased — belong to us, too. And we’re invited, we’re called, to return that love, to spread that love to those around us.

God loves us for who we are, right now, just as we are. God’s not waiting for us to lose a few pounds, or to be successful, or be able to prepare a gourmet meal or have an immaculately clean house before we are fully loved. We don’t have to earn our worthiness. We’re more than all our efforts and our accomplishments. All that God wants from us is us.

If we can come to truly know this, to hear this message with our hearts and absorb it deep within our bones, this is the source of our joy — that foundational belief that we are, just as we are, God’s beloved children. We are loved.

This message of beloved-ness is not of this world. There are relentless expectations within our culture for us as women: that we look perfect, do perfect, be perfect. Be perfect young women. Perfect wives and moms. Perfect at the elusive work/life balance. Perfect at somehow looking younger and holding ourselves together as we age. Perfect at finding time for it all: to volunteer; to get involved; to exercise and eat right and follow our passions. And whatever you do, make sure it all looks effortless, because it's supposed to be natural for us as women, to handle what life tosses at us with quiet dignity and grace.

And it's exhausting, just thinking about it.

The world's expectations are absurd. There seems to be that endless push to do everything, be everything that everyone needs, and somehow also manage to keep ourselves whole. It's not only impossible, but can drive us into overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

Some of you may be familiar with Brené Brown. She's a scholar, author, and public speaker, and over the past fifteen years or so, she has been involved in research on a range of topics, including vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy. She's the author of several best sellers, and if you haven't seen her TED-talk, I'd highly recommend looking it up on the internet.

In one of her books, *Daring Greatly*, Brené explores what she calls wholehearted living. It's about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness, a recognition that we are enough. Sure, we're imperfect and can be afraid, but we all are worthy of love and belonging. She encourages us to step away from the web of shame, and open ourselves to vulnerability and relationships, to being and accepting who we are, with all our bruises, stubbed toes, scrapes, and human frailties.

It's a message of today, but with roots in the gospel. All God wants from us, is us. We are precisely the gift God wants — in full and humble surrender. We are enough. We can trust in Christ, the wellspring and source of our true joy.

How can we better get in touch with the Spirit within us, that God-spark of Christ's light, love, and joy that dwells within each one of us?

It starts with prayer, with spending time with God. We can ask God each day to help open our hearts to seeing the many blessings that are around us. This daily time with God is so important, because it opens us to the gentle nudging of the Spirit, pointing us towards recognizing what's right in front of us — the joy that surrounds us.

Sure, we notice those big moments: the glorious wedding, the long-anticipated promotion, the newborn child or grandchild, a happy ending. But there's so much more in our daily lives — all those little things, the encounters and unforeseen blessings that occur each day: the hug of a child; that unexpected phone call from someone dear at just the right time; the understanding smile of a stranger, as your child is having a meltdown in the grocery aisle; that beautiful pair of cardinals that you already get to watch and enjoy in your own backyard, as you notice just how much of your garden has already begun to bloom. God loves us, and wants us to experience the joy that dwells in and among us.

And there's another way to attune ourselves to the Spirit, and get in touch with the joy that dwells within each of us — and that's being in community. We aren't meant to be islands: isolated and alone. We're meant to live our lives in relationship with God and each other . . . in listening and supporting and loving one another.

How many of us are more than happy to jump in and help another, whether it's picking up the kids, or providing a meal, or a just getting together to talk because someone is having a rough time. We even feel honored that we were trusted to be asked to help.

So why would we . . . and this is about me, as much as anyone else here . . . why would we look at our own need to ask for help as failure or weakness? Why is it okay for someone else to be vulnerable and willing to accept a helping hand, but we look at ourselves as incompetent if we can't do it all and need to ask for assistance? Those harsh, nagging voices in our head are not of God, but of the world, for God would want us to be gentle with ourselves, to accept love and support from others, just as we would give it to another.

Jesus shows us what it means to live into our faith by living in relationship: to love God, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to help one another — to comfort, support and sustain each other — as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For we are marvelously made in God's own image, created to be women of joy, living in relationship and community with hope, reflecting God's love back into the world.

And with God's help, we can come to know the depth of God's transforming love for us, and the delight God has in us, for we are enough.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, thank you for this time with one another as sisters in Christ. Help us, during this Holy Lenten season, to spend time each day with you, recognizing the blessings and joy that surrounds us. Help us to open ourselves to one another, and the joy of being in community, allowing us to trust and share our heartfelt concerns, as well as our joys, that together we can come to serve you in this world, sharing your great love for all your beloved children with all we encounter in this world. We ask all this In Jesus' name. Amen.