

## **The Joy of Giving** Emily Laurel, C. R. E.

Nehemiah, Chapter 8, Verses 9 and 10 NRSV

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

Matthew, Chapter 6, Verses 25-33 NRSV

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’

Hello, brothers and sisters in Christ. For those who don't know me, my name is Emily Laurel. My mother, Pauline Turner, and I joined First Presbyterian more than five years ago. She died at the age of 99-1/2, but not before she saw me complete my studies at Lay Academy, a program offered by the Presbytery of Arkansas that prepares ruling elders to serve smaller churches as pastors. Thank you, Joan, for offering our message for young disciples today. Joan and I are the first persons from First Presbyterian to study at Lay Academy.

Even though I am a lifelong Presbyterian, during the time Joan and I attended Lay Academy, I found our studies to be a real eye opener for me because I had not been exposed to much information about the heritage of the Presbyterian Church, which is that of the Reformed Tradition or Faith. Books such as this one ([Reformed Spirituality](#) by Howard Rice) have given me new insight into our rich spiritual heritage. For those who might not be familiar with

Presbyterianism, we are considered to be of the Reformed Tradition because we are among the Protestant denominations that trace their roots to the Swiss Reformation in the sixteenth century. These churches generally call themselves Reformed if they originated on the continent of Europe and Presbyterian if they began in the British Isles. Reformed denominations include the Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church, and possibly the Disciples of Christ (though that is a matter of debate). The influence of the Reformed tradition can also be found within The Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican traditions.

Let's begin with some definitions that might help us in clarifying the scriptures I read for you earlier. First, in the reading from the book of Nehemiah, the people are told not to mourn or weep after hearing the words of the law. The reading of the law occurred prior to the feast of trumpets. Called Rosh Hashanah or the Jewish New Year, the reading of the law was part of a solemn time of soul-searching, forgiveness, repentance, and remembering God's judgment. Also in Nehemiah, the people were reminded that the joy of the Lord was their strength. The Joy of the Lord is rooted in God's love and goes way beyond what might make us happy. Joy goes so far beyond happiness that it is present even in the midst of deep unhappiness.

To put the words from the book of Matthew into context, the time was early in the ministry of Jesus. He was walking in the hills and noticed many people following him, so He began to preach the Sermon on the Mount. He preached the sermon at a time when life was especially difficult for most people because of the rule of the Roman authorities. Not only could the authorities take part of their crops and charge exorbitant taxes, but also the people could be forced to work without pay, which is slavery. Many people were hungry or were only a meal or two away from starvation. It is in these dire circumstances that Jesus says do not worry.

The clear message of these verses is that if we could learn to trust in God as simply and completely as the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, we would never be anxious. That doesn't mean we would not have the same responsibilities, but we would be free from those awful feelings of anxiety, of fear, of dread, of worry. So, these teachings are about stopping worrying, not about stopping planning or stopping being responsible or stopping caring.

Key words in these passages are grieve and worry, and the opposite of grieve, worry, fear, anxiety, or dread is freedom from those feelings, resulting in happiness or a feeling of well-being, which can range from contentment to intense joy. Following the directive to strive first for the kingdom of God leads us to greater happiness; and for some people even beyond happiness to joy. We are told to release our feelings of worry and replace them with feelings of happiness or even joy by striving first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We might call that striving the work involved in spiritual training or spiritual

development. The ultimate result of this deepening of our personal spiritual relationship with God is to live lives free of worry and filled instead with inner happiness and perhaps even joy.

But, now we ask ourselves the sixty-four thousand dollar question-- just how we are supposed to strive for the kingdom of God? Although there are many tools out there for us, you and I have a rich and deeply spiritual heritage in the practices of our Reformed faith. Today I am excited to share with you several ways in which our Reformed ancestors opened themselves to the presence of God.

But first, I must mention that within today's churches of the Reformed Faith, the words spirituality and meditation seem to arouse suspicion. Why would this be so? It may be that we are unaware that our Reformed ancestors used Christian meditation daily, along with prayer and participation in the practices of their spiritual communities. According to Dr. Joel Beeke, more than 40 Puritans wrote on the art of Biblical meditation. He explains that what makes meditation in the Christian tradition distinct from other forms of meditation is that it is rooted in the word of God.

So, let's briefly look at Christian meditation in the Reformed Tradition and then at a set of instructions for living the Christian life, often called "the public means of grace."

According to Dr. Beeke, the Puritans recommended frequent meditation, ideally twice a day, but at least once daily. A person should set a particular time for meditation and stick with it, and the Lord's Day should be used for heavier doses of meditation. The first task is to ask the Holy Spirit for assistance, then to choose the scripture for that meditation. The time of meditation should always end with prayer and thanksgiving.

Now let's turn to the means of grace. Henry Scougal, a Scottish Calvinist Episcopalian who lived in the 1600s, was very influential among Scottish Presbyterians as well as English and American Puritans. He offered simple directions for the Christian life in his book, The Life of God in the Soul of Man, which he called the public means of grace.

I have chosen the public means of grace to share with you because they are in accordance with Biblical teachings and the principles of the Reformed Faith. These means of grace are tools for opening ourselves to God's grace, thus developing and deepening our spirituality. Although grace is God's gift, our spirituality does not develop by itself; rather, the self-control required to commit ourselves to regular spiritual practices is among the fruits of the spirit. But, since this does not come naturally, we need to learn how to do these basic practices; otherwise, we can become confused, lose our way, compromise our principles, and eventually discover that we are not the people we had intended to be. On the

other hand, the regular exercise of the means strengthens us in our faith, thus naturally dispelling the worry and fear in our lives.

The first four means of grace are always expressed privately and with others. They are prayer, Bible reading, consultation with others, and ethical living. Making these means of grace a regular part of our spiritual practices is essential but not sufficient without the other five means of grace, which are Worship in the Christian Community, the Sacraments, Participation in the Life of the Church, Giving, and Keeping the Sabbath.

Worship in the Christian Community helps to break down any barriers to God that we have. The singing of hymns is an important means by which we together offer praise and thanksgiving to God during worship. Our hymns are sung prayers, and our hymnal is the prayer book of the Reformed faith.

The Sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper are means of grace as well. The Heidelberg Catechism on the subject of developing faith states: "The Holy Spirit creates it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments." During baptism, everyone present is reminded that we are all welcomed by the grace of God and not by anything that we have done to merit that acceptance, and we are all expected to provide the baptized person with our mentorship and service as examples of Christian behavior. The Lord's Supper is another occasion for deepening and renewing our faith and sustaining our faithfulness. In this sacrament we are united with Christ in mystical union.

Participation in the life of the church is more than attending worship on Sundays. Rather, it is the way in which we involve ourselves in the duties and responsibilities of church membership throughout the week. At times it may seem like a tiresome duty or burden, but whenever we do something we fear we cannot do or feel we don't have time to do, we deepen our spiritual presence.

Giving is an important means of grace as well. When we give to others or part with something of value to us, whether it is our time, energy, or possessions, we discover that grace is present in the very act of sharing. When we are willing to let go of something, we make ourselves vulnerable to God's grace. True giving is giving without strings attached, giving that is truly sacrificial, and is always accompanied by prayer.

Finally, keeping the Sabbath or setting aside one day in seven has been central to Reformed spirituality for centuries. We are encouraged to use the Sabbath in worship, recreation, reading, conversation, and enjoyment of friends and family. This allows time for us to be renewed so that we are better able to manage our lives with vigor and enthusiasm

Christian meditation and all of the public means of grace are necessary because together they enable us to shape our lives in accordance with God's

directives. The biblical promise is that if we truly seek, we shall find God. The effects of our spiritual practices as we deepen our relationship with God can give us tremendous power to take what life dishes out, without worry. Then, as we are healed and pulled together into wholeness, we discover that our efforts become a journey of joyful discovery. Increasing our faith and trust in God and releasing worry and fear through our spiritual practices will be well worth the time and energy spent.

At this season of Thanksgiving, let us be grateful that the men and women of the Reformed Faith created the spiritual practices that we have today for they are key to fulfilling the directive given to us by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount—to strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And remember the words of Martin Luther, “God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but in trees and flowers and clouds and stars.” God writes the gospel in you and me as well, Thanks Be to God. Amen.