

Draw Near To Joy

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church of Birmingham

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Luke 3:7-18

CHILDREN'S TIME

I imagine that there are, or will be soon, many beautifully wrapped presents like this one under your Christmas tree at home. If you have presents already under your tree, have you looked to see if any of them have your name on them? Let's look at this one. Have you tried to guess what might be in those packages?

When I was little, I checked the presents under our tree but I wasn't so interested in the presents that had other people's names on them, only the ones that were for me. Is it the same for you? Most of the time, we think only of ourselves.

There is a story in the Bible about a man named John who helped people get ready for Jesus. He called people to stop sinning and be baptized so that they would be ready for Jesus. People from all over were coming to hear what John had to say.

John always welcomed them but also asked them to do something first.

John told them that if they had two coats, they were to give one to someone who didn't have one. And if they had food, they were to share it with someone else who didn't have so much. In other words, John was telling them to stop thinking only of themselves and start thinking about others.

Christmas is only a bit more than a week away. How much thought have you given to what you can do for others during the Christmas season? We have been given so much — do you think you have enough to give to others? What are some ways that you can do that?

One of the things we are doing this year is to honor the police officers and fire women and men during Christmas. Did you know that some of them can't be with their family during Christmas because they have to work to keep other people safe? Well, there will be people from this congregation making cookies to give them on Christmas to let them know that they are appreciated. Do you think they will appreciate that? I think so.

SERMON

Draw near to joy.

OK, let's try something. On the count of three, I want everyone to feel joy. OK, ready — 1 ... 2 ... 3 go! Who feels it? Anyone? What's wrong with you that you can't just feel joy?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't need to exert any effort in order to find joy? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we woke up every morning singing the praises of God's glory that fills the world and all of the gifts God has lavishly adorned the landscape of our lives? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our spirit was effortlessly filled with joy as our first and primary way of being?

Now, perhaps you have had the experience on occasion of waking up some morning this way — in the space of pure and glorious joy. And perhaps you have hung out there for a period of time. Maybe you have felt this while you were on vacation somewhere like Niagara Falls, or the Grand Canyon — or it was after a baby was born, or your wedding day, or some other monumental occasion in your life.

Most of the time, we attribute joy to something that happens to us in our life — something that comes to

us from the outside, and our response to this occasion is joy.

We often say that we enjoy reading, or sailing, or running, or going out to dinner with friends, or any number of other things.

We say these things as if to say that it is the activity that brings us joy.

We then fall into the trap of believing that joy comes from something we do or is only experienced when we have something. We believe that joy can only come from something else, so we look to the world to bring us joy and when it doesn't we live in constant disappointment.

Consider that it actually works the other way around. When we are fully present to what we are doing, joy comes from within us and is expressed out to the world.

Consider that joy is a gift from God to the world through us — that God has built joy into us as human beings.

The world will not bring us joy, but God brings joy to the world through us when we are consciously present to our lives.

Elkhart Tolle talked about the relationship between the things we

do and joy. He wrote in A New Earth,

“You will enjoy any activity in which you are fully present, any activity that is not just a means to an end. It isn’t the action you perform that you really enjoy, but the deep sense of aliveness that flows into it.”

Back when I taught massage therapy at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy, I found a shiatsu practitioner and for a time traded services with her. I would give to her a 90-minute massage therapy session and she would give me a 90-minute shiatsu session. It was a wonderful arrangement.

Some of you may have heard of shiatsu. It’s a bodywork modality that engages with the energy flow in the body and works to balance and free that energy where it has been stuck using pressure along meridian channels that run through the body. That’s where the name comes from — shiatsu literally means “finger pressure.”

I distinctly recall one of these shiatsu sessions and the amazingly profound experience I had. I was driving home afterward and laughing out loud in the total joy I felt to be alive. All of my concerns about what had happened earlier that day or concerns for what was

coming in the future all evaporated and I was left joyfully in the present moment. It was in the present moment that I experienced the joy of life like I had always dreamed it might be or perhaps could be. I found that joy was no longer something I dreamed for the future, but was and always will be available right now.

How we cloud our lives with concerns about yesterday and tomorrow and miss the joy of now!

I would like to invite you to draw near to the joy within you, here ... now. Close your eyes, because your sight can sometimes get in the way. I want to remind you that there is nothing else you need to be doing right now. There is no concern about later that you can’t pick up and pay attention to later. The space is open and clear for you to be fully present and here. Open your heart and awareness to your breath coming in through your nose and mouth and filling your lungs. Feel your body move as the air fills you, and then move again as you exhale. Listen to your breath. Feel your breath. Simply notice your body. Other thoughts might come into your mind. Simply acknowledge them and set them aside. You can come back to them later. Just notice your breath. As you inhale, imagine that along with air you are filled with joy — the joy

of life! There is nothing more important than the life that fills you. Simply notice.

From the space of now, I invite you to hear the passage from Luke.

READ LUKE 3:7-18

One of the things I notice in this passage is how John encouraged the people to focus on the basic needs of others — sharing their clothes with those who don't have any. Sharing food with those who don't have enough.

He goes on to encourage moral and just living in the present. It is clear that there were those in John's day, just like in ours, who were tempted regularly to manipulate the system to their own benefit using the privilege and leverage they possessed. This would happen in their normal course of work, or in public service, government work. John told them that living with integrity was essential in the new world that God was growing through the Messiah.

In God's new world, basic needs are met by all people. There literally are passages throughout the Bible, cover to cover, front to back, that call us to give to those who currently have need. This was imperative in Jesus' teaching.

We simply must do this. But there is more to understand with these actions.

Giving selflessly pulls us out of the past and out of the future. It realigns us with our basic nature which is good and draws us into the present moment where we are wonderfully positioned to experience true joy.

The more we give of what we have and who we are, the more connected we are with joy, and the more we can offer of that joy to the world. Joy then grows and fills the world. This is a picture of God's new world.

There is no comparison. We certainly are much more blessed when we give than when we receive. We don't go out looking for joy, as if we can manufacture it by our desire to find it out there in something we can possess or do. We cannot find joy that way.

Instead, joy is our natural state and found when we are conscious in the present moment, giving of ourselves to the world in need.

Giving, then, is an expression of joy and an act of justice. Listen to Sarah Are's poetic encouragement that we would invest all of ourselves to draw near to justice.

draw near to justice

By Sarah Are

It takes all of me to draw near to justice—
My whole, sinful, honest self.
There is no option for part of my heart to break,
for a fraction of my mind to recognize truth,
for just one of my legs to march.
It's all or nothing,
my life or our lives,
daylight or darkness.
Maybe that's why justice is so hard.
In order to be just, it takes all of who we are—
Sins, scars, guilt and all.
So I pray—
Break my whole heart, God.
Break my heart and in the cracks,
in the fractured places,
plant seeds of strength
so that justice will grow in me
and I in it,
like a wildflower that can't be tamed.
Bit by bit
I cling to your word.
Bit by bit,
I turn my heart into a garden
for your justice to take root.
It is not an option for part of my heart to break.