



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

It's About Joy

A Sermon by the Rev. Kenneth Swanson, Ph.D.

Grace Church, Millbrook, New York

At the Induction of the Rev. Dr. Mathew Calkins as Rector, June 14, 2015

Reading John 15:9-16

Much of the dramatic tension in Chaim Potok's great novel The Chosen, turns on the attraction a teenage Jewish boy named Reuven Malther feels toward a Jewish Hasidic sect living near his home in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It's tension because Reuven's father is a scientist who passionately believes in reason as the sole source of human meaning and wants his son to believe as he does. Yet what Reuven cannot deny is that there is something in the Hasidic way of life that is irresistible.

What is it? Joy. The Hasidim are filled with joy when they debate fine points of Talmudic law. They brim over with joy when they worship. Joy overflows when they sit at table, or celebrate with one of their circle dances. Joy is the very center of their lives.

The notion that joy is to be understood as the goal, the culmination of human existence, that we as human beings were created for joy, is a particularly Jewish insight. The Greeks felt joy, or *chara*, was a minor human passion. Aristotle subordinated it to pleasure, especially to sexual pleasure. Buddhists consider joy to be one of the *tanha*, a desire that prevents a person from achieving enlightenment or *nirvanah*. For them it is something to be discarded, denied, left

behind.

Not so for the Jews. The linguist Kaufman Kohler has written that no other language has as many words for joy and rejoicing as does Hebrew. There are no less than ten different Hebrew terms for joy. The most common is *shimha*, which means “gladness” or “mirth”. Then there is *gul*, which means, “to spring about joyfully”, as did King David before the Ark of the Covenant. Other common Hebrew words are *mashosh* meaning “joy” or “rejoicing”; and *shameah* which means “to shine” or “to be glad”.

Hebrew joy is not just an inner feeling. The experience and expression of joy are closely linked. The whole person is caught up in it. Joy always has a cause and finds expression. Joy must be shared. As one rabbi has written, “there is no joy without eating and drinking.” Now I like that! As a matter of fact the Hebrew word for feast is *shimhah*, which as I’ve already said is derived from the primary word for joy. And contrary to pagan thought, for the Jew, joy is always coupled with morality. The unrighteous or unholy person will never experience joy.

Pure joy, unadulterated joy is in found in God as both source and object. The deepest primary joy comes from embracing God’s concrete saving acts in history, such as the promise given to Abraham, the grace given through Joseph in Egypt, the Exodus, the recovery of the Ark of the Covenant, the victories of the Maccabees. God is a God of joy. All this is expressed in Psalm 126, “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then we were like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” The joy of Israel is also eschatological, looking forward to God’s final act of salvation, as it also says in Psalm 126, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negev. Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.”

Several years ago Ken Kanter, Senior Rabbi at Temple Beth Micah in Nashville, and I co-led a combined Jewish-Christian pilgrimage to Spain. Our goal was to share in exploring those places where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together in relative harmony for over five hundred years. We had a wonderful time. Many close relationships were established. We visited astonishing sites in Madrid, Segovia, Toledo, Granada, Cordoba and Seville. We worshipped together every day. On Friday evening Ken, Ken the rabbi, led a teaching Shabbat service. It began with the singing of simple, buoyant songs. It ended with all of us embracing and saying to one another *Shabbat shalom*. True to the Jewish character and ethos, it was a liturgy marked by joy.

Being on this pilgrimage led me to reflect on what it means to be Christian. Christian identity is drawn from both Hebrew and Hellenistic cultures. But we can never forget that what is Hellenistic, what is Greek and Roman as well as what is Celtic, has been grafted on. Our roots, from which we draw our richest sustenance, are Jewish. And that means we need to embrace the centrality of joy.

Christian joy is linked closely with the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ. The infancy narratives are shot through with a sense of joy. When the pregnant Mary visited her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist declared, “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” To which Mary replied, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” The angelic host sang with joy at Jesus’ birth, and the shepherds were positively beside themselves with joy.

The dominant mood surrounding Jesus’ public ministry was one of joy, particularly joyous table-fellowship. In referring to himself Jesus said, “Abraham rejoiced to see this day.” As he told his disciples in today’s Gospel lesson, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Christian joy is linked to Jesus’ saving act in the Atonement of his death and resurrection, which allows us to be forgiven and enter deep intimacy with God. He described the joy in heaven over the finding of the lost sheep. And he spoke often of the paradox of sadness and suffering being transformed into joy. As he said to his disciples, “although you will be sad for a little while, you will know joy.” And in biblical reflection there is an understanding of the paradox of eschatological joy, that any joy we know now is just a taste, a preliminary down payment to what we will know in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is exactly what Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper, the night before his crucifixion. He prayed aloud so his disciples would hear and understand, “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Have I made my case? If so, do you have a sense of what I’m talking about? Do you know what joy feels like? C.S. Lewis has written that it is elusive, although we have all had a taste of it. It is what we see at airports at the moment loved ones first make eye contact. It is what we feel when we hear the opening bars of a piece of music we love, or when we first smell the aroma of our favorite food. It’s always just beyond us, beckoning to us, but we never fully realize it, we never capture it. St. Augustine has written that every human being longs for it, that desire for joy is like a God-shaped vacuum, a God shaped emptiness inside each one of us. We spend our whole lives trying to fill that emptiness, with things, with relationships, with achievement, with sensual pleasure. But ultimately nothing satisfies, because it is a God-shaped vacuum. Only God can perfectly fill all of its contours.

The joy that God offers us in Jesus Christ is not to be found in theological, moral or ecclesiastical certainty. It is found in him, in a relationship with him we can only enter into through faith. A relationship with him that becomes ours through repentance, and the receiving and giving of forgiveness. A relationship with him that can be nurtured through prayer. A relationship with him that is fed by the sacraments. A relationship with him that becomes real as we give ourselves to others in ministry of service.

Several years ago Volney Gay, Professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University, invited me to join him for a private meeting with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, just before Tutu was to give a speech at the university. The Archbishop had just finished chemotherapy and radiation treatment for cancer, and in our meeting he was very quiet and subdued, with low energy. He was lying on a couch, and he spoke so softly I had to lean in to hear what he was saying. Half an hour later he was speaking to a packed auditorium about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He became so energized and joyous in talking about the grace of God that he actually started jumping up and down in place, like a four-year-old waiting to open his first present on Christmas day. Imagine this, a Nobel laureate, one of the most distinguished, respected and honored people in the world, crying out about the wondrous power and love of God in Jesus Christ. Twenty-five hundred awestruck people in that auditorium all had smiles on their faces because his joy was so winsome, so appealing.

Declaring and knowing that this joy can be found only in relationship with God may be the greatest gift Jews have given to humanity. This Matt, is what I hope becomes the center of your ministry here at Grace, a place I know you, like me, will come to love. Is the joy of Desmond Tutu something you would like to know? Is there a joy in your life that would attract others? Is there a joy in this community here at Grace Church that could attract someone the way Reuven Malther was attracted to that Hasidic community in Brooklyn? My prayer is that together you will seek to become a community of joy. Because until we do, all Christians do, we simply haven't yet understood the words of Jesus: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

AMEN.