
From the Pastor's Desk

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Finding Joy

Several years ago, I was heading down Stewart Avenue and saw a church sign. It was one of those that proclaims inspirational messages on a rotational basis. It said something like: "True joy is found only in Christ." So I mused on that for a while. (Musing – thinking idly and creatively - was a thing that I used to do before I had a smart phone.) Is that true? Is joy only to be found in Christ? If it were, what evidences of it would we expect to see?

Well, first of all, we would expect that people outside the church would be less joyful. Are they? I'm not sure. Like Christian clergy, I don't really know many people outside my faith. But I might say that most atheists that I know do seem angry and stressed. But not all. As for people of other faiths, that's even less clear. One of my favorite spiritual writers is the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, and one reason I like him is the delight in the present moment he embodies. Then there's the joyful poetry of the Muslim mystic, Rumi. (Rumi was a Dervish, a group that expressed their love for God by dancing wildly.) Sure, there are miserable people in every faith, but the question was whether joy could only be found in Christ. That doesn't appear to be so.

Then, if joy is especially connected to Christ, one would expect Christians to be more joyful than people of other religions or no religion at all. Here's where the statement really falls apart. Joy and contentment, delight in life – these are not the first thing that anyone thinks of when they think of Christians. In the popular mind, we are the people who get angry about toilet accommodations and Starbucks coffee cups and store clerks who say "Happy Holidays." instead We are the ones who boycott of department stores who offer accommodations to transgender people and petition for bakeries to have the right to refuse service to gay couples. None of this smacks of joy.

However you feel about these issues, surely we can agree that they are ridiculously trivial things to get worked up about. The cause of Christ is neither advanced nor hurt by a coffee cup design, and I just can't believe there's a long line of gay couples that are desperate to have their wedding cakes made by people who disapprove of them.

Fortunately, while this is a widely-held public perception, only a small sampling of Christians obsess over this trivia. Most of us agree we have more important things to think about. Unfortunately, we don't evidence much more joy in our important endeavors, either. At least in the American church, we are a driven people: set on the task of "growing" our churches and "Rethinking Church" and being "Purpose-Driven" and "Missional." We go to leadership conferences and learn new strategies and vie with increasing intensity for what feels like a shrink-ing religious market. And, while none of that is necessarily bad – we should be intentional about what we do in the church – none of it is joyful, either. Joy, it seems to me, is not so much something we achieve as something we experience spontaneously, in the present moment. When we experience it, it is as a gift, not a victory, and far too few of us experience it all.

When did you last experience what you would call joy? Not the temporary euphoria of winning a playoff game, but deep peace and contentment that has nothing to do with circumstances? In February, I am going to be preaching about joy – not how to achieve it (which can't be done) but what barriers might be prevent-ing us from encountering this gift of God.