

19 February 2017

Finding Joy . . . Through Giving
Isaiah 58:1-10; 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

Last week, when we were thinking about sabbath, we read from Isaiah 58, verses 13-14. Just a little bit earlier in that same chapter, though, we find another step toward experiencing joy. As we read the first ten verses of Isaiah 58, listen to what changes our gloom to noonday – and what doesn't:

58 *Shout out, do not hold back!*
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
² *Yet day after day they seek me*
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.
³ *'Why do we fast, but you do not see?*
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴ *Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight*
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
⁵ *Is such the fast that I choose,*
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
⁶ *Is not this the fast that I choose:*
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸ *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,*
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, *Here I am.*
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

For our New Testament reading today, we turn to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, to a passage where he is raising money for disaster relief – a famine in Judea. We read 2 Corinthians 9:6-12:

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'
¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

As I've talked about joy the past couple of weeks, I've argued that experiencing joy is not so much an achievement as a discovery. That is, we don't reach out to attain joy as something that exists outside ourselves but rather clear out the cluttered places of our own lives in order to give room for the joy that is a part of our inheritance from God. We just set the table with clean plates, and the joy will fill the board. In this strain, I've talked about clearing out the clutter of our material possessions and the frantic clutter of unfiltered information. There is no joy in external circumstance: not in wealth and not in politics. Then I talked about sabbath, about limiting our work to its proper place in our lives. We may discover joy in our work – I hope we do – but we will not in a life consumed by work. We cannot find joy in such external things.

Today I want to talk about the *internal* clutter that inhibits joy – self-centeredness. This isn't one of the "things of this world" that creep into our hearts get in the way. This is something that's already there, and it is one of the greatest barriers to living a whole life. Think about it. Think about the person you know whom you would call the best example of joy. Now I'm not talking about the person who laughs or jokes the most. I don't mean someone who's always "happy." Frankly, that's a little weird. Joy is more about accepting life and the present circumstance as it is, without letting that circumstance hold our well-being hostage. You may not have known anyone like that; there aren't many. I've known few. But I think of an old saint named LeRoy Gaines that I knew in Kentucky, a man whose very presence communicated peace and joy. LeRoy lived in a tiny, one-room house on the edge of town. There he cared for his wife

as she declined and died, and yet he managed his simple existence and grief with unforgettable grace and peace. Think of your LeRoy. Now, ask yourself this: How much did that person focus on himself or herself and how much on others? I know the answer.

Or look at it from the opposite end. At this point in our history, many of you for one reason or another will have read the diagnostic tools for identifying Narcissistic Personality Disorder. I won't list them now, but people with this mental illness are incapable of thinking about others except as tools to use for their own purposes. To narcissists, there are no standards that matter except what will get them what they want, and so narcissists will lie and manipulate without compunction. Clinically, it's a terrifically difficult disorder to treat, because the narcissist believes that everyone else thinks the same way and so doesn't believe what a therapist says. Maybe you know or can think of someone who fits this pattern. Now ask yourself this: Can you imagine that person experiencing joy? Or even temporary happiness?

No, there is a direct one-to-one correlation between selflessness and joy. The more time and energy we expend on things that only benefit ourselves, the more miserable we will be. But the more we do for others, the more joy we discover. And that's *precisely* the joy that we were created to experience. This is what our faith should offer at every turn. This is what church should be like: the place where we all put others before ourselves and find ourselves content and full and whole and joyous.

It just, you know, isn't always that way. I want to look again our reading from Isaiah 58. God calls the people to a "fast" day. Now you know what fasting is, right? Denying yourself by going without food so as to be closer to God, right? God says, "No, no, no, no, no! That's not it! Yes, fasting is about denying yourself, but it's more than skipping meals!" First, God says he's not interested in fasting that doesn't change behavior: *Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.* Then God says, "And will you please cut out the attention-seeking theatrics?" *Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?* Evidently in the post-exilic Jewish community this oracle is addressed to, it was common practice to "deny yourself" ostentatiously, in ways calculated to draw others' attention to your religious virtue. It was self-denial with utterly self-serving motives, and God was having none of it.

Well, what *is* fasting, then? I can't put it better than Isaiah does, so let me just read it to you again:

⁶ *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,*

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;*

when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

⁹ *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰ *if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

You want to please God? Don't go without food. Open your eyes to the needs of others around you, put your own convenience aside, and help. You want to know joy? Do you want your light to break forth like the dawn and your healing to spring up? Do you want your gloom to be like noonday? Give of yourself to others.

The point is this, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Now this verse is often used in tithing sermons to mean something like, "Give lots of money to the church, and you'll get lots of money back." Yeah, not quite. You see, God's bounty is not about money. God's bounty is joy, wholeness, contentment. A better paraphrase of this verse, and of the rest of the passage would be something like, "Give what you have to those who are in need, and God will make sure you have more to share." Or, as Paul puts it later in the passage, God will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God.

This past Thursday morning, as I worked on this sermon, I strolled down from my office to watch the Downtown Memory Café in action. It was hopping. Our tables were not only full of guests, but we also had four visitors from Wisconsin Rapids who had come up to observe. They've heard of this good thing that our church is doing, and they drove up to find out more. That's what bounty looks like. We sang, and Jerry Evans talked about his years as a barber, and we looked at pictures – scanned and projected on a screen – of old hairstyles. We laughed. We sang. The Memory Café team was on their feet serving fruit and Valentine's Day cookies for an hour, and wouldn't have traded the opportunity to do so for anything. That's what bounty looks like. For an hour and a half, our Parlor was a safe place for everyone, was an outpost of Christ's kingdom, where everyone was thinking of someone else before themselves. That's what Paul calls bounty. That's what I call joy.