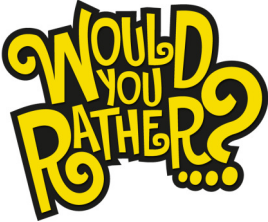


Was Jesus Happy?  
December 11, 2016  
Psalm 47, John 15:9-17  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
Pastor Dave Carver



Are you familiar with the game known as “Would You Rather?” It’s a conversation-starter featuring questions in which players are asked to choose between one of two options. You can’t say “both” and you can’t say “neither”. Some are simple matters of preference: “Would you rather be a firefighter or an astronaut?” Others seem irrelevant to me: “Would you rather eat the same meal every day for the rest of your life or give up Instagram?” And some are downright cruel: “Would you rather listen to Nickelback every day for the rest of your life or read the entire 56 page iTunes terms and conditions every day for the rest of your life?”

Here’s one for Advent: Would you rather be happy or joyful?

Maybe that’s a trick question, so let me ask you to ponder this for a moment: is there a difference between joy and happiness? On the one hand, we tend to use those words differently. On the other hand, the dictionary uses those words to define each other:

**happiness**

**hap**-e-nis/ noun  
1. the quality or state of being happy.  
2. good fortune; pleasure; contentment; **joy**.

**Happiness (noun)**

1. the quality or state of being happy.
2. good fortune; pleasure; contentment; joy.

**joy**

**joy**/ noun  
1. the emotion of great delight or **happiness** caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation...

**Joy (noun)**

1. the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation...

Maybe me asking if you’d rather feel happy or joyful is akin

to me asking whether you prefer rain or snow. Is there a difference between water and ice? On the one hand, there is no difference at all. Ice is water. Water becomes ice. In either case, we're looking at two atoms of hydrogen for every atom of oxygen. But on the other hand, we surely experience rain and snow differently, don't we?

J.D. Salinger, author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, once wrote "The fact is always obvious much too late, but the most singular difference between happiness and joy is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid." I like that.



Joy is a form of happiness to be sure, but it is not exactly the same. It's the kind of happiness that comes to us in surprising ways, that runs over us, or that seeps into us even when we're not quite sure what we're looking for.

Happiness, in my mind, can be very fleeting and tends to be related to some sort of outward circumstance: "I won the lottery!", or "He went to Jared's", or "That was the best steak I've ever eaten in my life." Joy, however, tends to be longer-lasting and is related to something that is more inwardly-focused: "My life is so much better since I stopped worrying about money!", or "I am loved!", or "Everybody seemed to really enjoy themselves at dinner tonight..."

Maybe another way to think about it is this: we are often *happy* because of some physical sensation or material object ("Have you *seen* my new car?"); we tend to experience joy as a result of a spiritual awakening or a burst of gratitude ("It is so wonderful not to have to wait at the bus stop every morning!").



I bring all of this up, of course, because this month we are looking at the traditional Advent emphases of the church. As such, I note that on this, the third

Sunday of Advent, we celebrate what the church has called *Gaudete Sunday* – the Sunday of Joy. The name comes from the beginning of the liturgy that the early Christians used in Latin: *Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete* (Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say, rejoice). You may not have noticed, but in addition to lighting our first two Advent candles – purple to symbolize the reflection and repentance appropriate to the season – this morning we lit the one pink candle. Many churches use the pink candle to remember and proclaim that even as the days become longer and darker, there is a sense that joy is on the horizon. You may not be happy about the fact that it's freezing outside and it will get dark at 4:30 and our boiler is struggling to keep up with the draft in here... but we can celebrate the truth that none of these things matter in comparison to the gift of the Christ child.

This kind of thought is especially meaningful to me this year as one of the most important part of my Advent disciplines is preparing the team of five young leaders from Crafton Heights for a visit to our sister church in Malawi.



It has been my great honor and deep joy to worship with the church in many, many places around the world: from Malawi to South Sudan to the Soviet Union or Mexico or Haiti or Korea or South America... I am thrilled to have been present in so many different kinds of worship. Yet one thing strikes me, and frankly, annoys me. When I am with a group of Americans at worship in the developing world, the almost universal reaction is this: “Wow, Dave, did you see that? I mean, these people are so *poor*! Their lives are so *difficult*! And yet they are so *happy*!”

I want to tell you, nothing chaps my hide as quickly as having some well-meaning person look at an economically challenged community and say, “Sure, they’re poor, but look how

*happy* they are. I could never be happy like that.”



The reality is that reasoning comes from a false equivalence. We fall into that line of thinking when we assume that our happiness is dependent on our outward situation. People aren't *happy* being poor or facing difficulty. Yet they can be filled with joy even in those circumstances as they hold to a higher truth. Theologian Henri Nouwen wrote, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away.”<sup>1</sup>

That rings true in our Gospel reading for today. I don't think that many people would consider the events of Maundy Thursday and call Jesus “happy”. We have read from John's description of the Last Supper. He is on his way to what scholars have called “the agony in the garden,” where Luke tells us that he experienced such stress that he was sweating blood. He spent the night preparing for his own suffering and death – this was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a “good day”.

And yet, here he is, however improbably, telling his best friends (all of whom would scatter in the moments to come) about the joy that he has, and about his longing for them to experience the same joy in their own lives.

You know the truth: viewed through any lens but that of faith, this is a nonsensical proposition. There is simply no call for Jesus to be happy about his impending pain, suffering and death. Of course. And I cannot believe that he *is* happy about those things.

But what if Jesus is *not*, in fact, happy about his impending torture and the agony of the crucifixion, but rather *is* filled with some sort of joy as a result of participating in God's plan of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Heart of Henri Nouwen*, quoted at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14116>

redemption, healing, and hope? What if the thought of other people, such as his disciples or even us, sharing in that mission was enough to give Jesus the ability to look past the anticipated pain and torment of the days ahead and into a reality where human hearts were shaped according to God's design?

And what if our friends in Malawi or elsewhere in the developing world are not happy because they are privileged to live in some of the harshest places on the planet in terms of infant mortality, HIV/AIDS infection, or access to clean water... but rather, they are filled with joy at the prospect of being able to participate in the body of Christ at work around the world? What if, instead of wondering why someone can be so happy while they are so poor, we committed ourselves to sharing in the transformative work of Christ in a way that focuses less on what we have and more on who we are?

I know I've been quoting a lot of theologians this morning, but here's one more. This is from the late Theodor Geisel, who considered this very mystery in one of his more celebrated works:



And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold  
in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling,  
“How could it be so? It came without ribbons.  
It came without tags. It came without  
packages, boxes or bags.”

And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore.  
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before.  
“Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “doesn't come from a  
store. Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit  
more.”<sup>2</sup>



What if the point of life is not to be happy, but rather to share joy? If that's the case, then we can seek to spread the joy of Advent each day no matter

*Grinch Stole Christmas* (New York: Random House 1957)

what our current situation. Pope Francis, preaching on Gaudete Sunday in 2014, said “Many people in the rush toward Christmas fret about all they still haven’t done for holiday preparations,...Think of all the good things life has given you.”<sup>3</sup>

Can we do that? Can we, gathered here in this place, make today a day of joy?

Here’s what I want you to do. When you get home, don’t worry about the fact that you’ve got that list of cards to send or gifts to wrap. Instead, take a breath and make a phone call or write a letter to one person and express gratitude for that person and his or her place in your life.

And now some of you are saying, “Great, Dave. Thanks for that. You should know that the person I’d most like to share that with has died, and this is my first Christmas without her or him.” If that’s the case, then go home, take a breath, and remember that person. Give yourself permission to weep for your loss, if need be. Grieve over what has been taken... but – and this is a very big but – rejoice that you had that time with that person. Give thanks for what you have received.

Today, I want you to remember that while we sometimes think of happiness as being fleeting, joy is a kind of happiness that comes from a deep, deep place – it is a gift that is received.

To put it quite simply, spiritual experience, whether it be of faith, hope (or expectancy), or love, is something we cannot manufacture, but which we can only receive. If we direct our lives to seeking it for ourselves we shall lose it, but if we lose our lives by living out the daily way of Christ we shall find it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Pope Francis: Enough Gloom, Try Joy Ahead of Christmas”, *The Whittier Daily News* 12/14/14, quoted <http://www.whittierdailynews.com/social-affairs/20141214/pope-francis-enough-gloom-try-joy-ahead-of-christmas>

<sup>4</sup> “Yielding to God”, Philip Britts in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Plough, 2001), entry for December 9.



The joy of the Christian life comes as a result of a process. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he talked about his desire that their joy may be made “complete”.

This gift of joy is one that comes over time, and it is cumulative. In John 16, or James 1, or Psalm 16, or I John 4, or John 17, or Philippians 2, or II John 12, or dozens of other places, some biblical writer talks about having a joy that is some how “made complete”. Today, ask God to help you view your reality and your gifts and your opportunities in such a way as to be able to take a step closer to that kind of completion.

Today, let us join with Jesus and the shepherds, with Mary and Joseph, with the people of God in Malawi and South Sudan and a dozen other places around the world to spend less time looking for ways to make our lives easier, or more fun, or less mundane, and more time searching for opportunities to participate in the Big Thing that God is doing. The Big Thing might hurt. I’m guaranteeing that it’ll cost you. But the result, my friends, is joy. I promise. Better than that – God promises.

And wouldn’t you rather be joyful?

Thanks be to God! Amen.