

The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy

based on Joy by Chris Marshall, (Vision Vol. 15, No. 2)

John 16:21-24, Philippians 4:1,4 by Patty Friesen (September 8/19)

A number of years ago the Boston Globe carried the story of an engaged couple who went to an expensive hotel in the city to book their wedding. They put down a large non-refundable deposit for several hundred guests and continued making wedding plans. As the joyful day approached, the groom-to-be got cold feet and broke off the engagement. The bride went to the hotel and they said, “sorry no refunds. Why don’t you have a party anyhow?” The bride warmed to the idea of a party for the ditched. The hotel asked what she would like served at the meal – she said “boneless chicken” in honor of the groom! Then she invited Boston’s down and outs, folks on the street – whomever she could find. The night was supreme joy – white lights, bag ladies dancing with drug addicts to big band music while everyone feasted on boneless chicken.

In his book *The Originality of the Christian Message*, Scottish theologian H.R. Mackintosh described how Christianity is unique among the religions of the world because of its joy. Modern scholars would not write with such bold assertions of the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity. But that is what makes it so interesting and refreshing. Mackintosh proposed what set earlier Christianity apart from other religions in first century Greco-Roman culture was its’ message of redemption as a present joyful experience. It was not just the assertion of bodily life beyond the grave that made Christianity different; it was also its emphasis on salvation as a presently available experience of moral, spiritual and emotional transformation, an experience of what

Mackintosh calls “present blessedness,” the blessedness of union with God in Christ, in the here and now.

We’ve been talking about the blessed life or the fruitful life or the flourishing Christian life this fall as we describe the fruit or the characteristics that the Holy Spirit grows in us. Many of us grew up with an emphasis on the role of *faith* in the Christian life. If we have faith - belief in Christ we are saved but Mackintosh reminds us that the New Testament talks more about the role of *joy* in present redemption.

The first century Greco-Roman world, he explains, was marked by a pervading sense of darkness, pessimism, superstition and fear. Cruelty and bloodshed were everywhere. By contrast, the New Testament is “the most obviously exultant book that has ever been written.” The spirit of this literature is encapsulated in Paul’s thrice-repeated injunction to the Philippians, “Finally, my sisters and brothers, rejoice in the Lord....Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice!” Such an emphasis on joy and reducing in the Christian community was highly unusual in the religious environment of the time. Mackintosh is worth quoting in full:

Students of first-century literature need not be told that this distinctively Christian gladness, or glad fearlessness, was a strange new thing. Such joy unspeakable and full of glory is not found in other faiths. Jesus somehow was able to give people the courage to believe themselves redeemed...not merely by speaking to them about God, but by revealing in Christ’s own life the security and gladness which flow from trust in God’s love. As Matthew Arnold said, “It is the gladness of Christianity which has made it successful, not its sorrow. Alone in the religions of the world, it dared to say, Rejoice Evermore. This is a fact so distinctive that some thinkers have actually defined

Christianity as “salvation by joy”. The joy in God generated by Christ was a new phenomenon in religious history and one charged with boundless significance for the creation of fruitful living.

Where does this early Christian experience of irrepressible joy come from? From four interrelated places. 1. The first source of joy was *the unshakeable belief the first believers had in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead*, an event that proved beyond all question he had secured a definitive victory over the powers of death and evil. This belief generated immense hope for the future and an intrepid fearlessness of persecution and death itself. “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?” was the early Christian chant in the midst of persecution and death.

The second source of Christian joy was *the awareness of having received a radical forgiveness and fresh start* that enabled them to walk in a newness of life a newness characterized by a profound sense of liberty and lightness. Romans 8, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the Spirit of Christ has set you free.”

The third reason for joy was *the experience of belonging to a new social community, the body of Christ*, a new kind of society in which “there isn longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28). Participation in this community brought a feeling of mutual solidarity and support as well as a newfound sense of dignity and equality that cut across all the deepest social divisions of the day.

The fourth and most important source of early Christian joy was the *indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst*. This was not a matter of

abstract doctrine; it was a matter of tangible experience, an experience, it seems, of being immersed in liquid love. That is why Paul can say that, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts” - like molten fire - through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). Over and over again in the New Testament, the experience of joy is attributed to the Holy Spirit, sent like a tidal wave upon the young early church.

It was these four interconnected realities, then, that generated this effervescent, contagious joy that distinguished the early Christian movement. That doesn’t mean Christians exercised a monopoly on joy. All people have the capacity to know profound joy, as a result of being made in God’s image. Joy is a manifestation of God’s common grace to all people.

But while joy is not unique to Christians, there is still something unique about Christian joy. You might say that Christian joy is human joy on steroids, with the steroidal injection comprising the four realities just described - a confidence in Christ’s triumph over death and the forces of evil; the knowledge personal forgiveness and freedom; participation in a loving community of worship, equality and support; and most importantly, immersion in the pulsating life and power of God’s Spirit.

But wait! There’s more...Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of this steroidal Christian joy was its capacity to coexist with suffering and distress. The New Testament writers repeatedly speak of joy and suffering as simultaneous realities. They are not mutually exclusive. They don’t cancel each other out. Instead they run on a kind of divided highway, existing side by side at the same time.

This coexistence is attested everywhere in the New Testament, “We want you to know, sisters and brothers,” Paul writes to the Corinthians “about the grace of God that

has been granted to the churches of Macedonia (OMC), for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy...overflowed in a wealth of generosity (2 Cor 8:1-2). The writer of James goes so far as to suggest that “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (James 1:2).

These texts all speak of joy in the time of trial, joy in the midst of sorrow. The sorrow is still sorrow. The pain is real; it still hurts. It is never denied, or repressed, or trivialized. And yet paradoxically - even miraculously - suffering is accompanied by a tenacious, inextinguishable joy. This distinctively Christian blend of severe suffering and joyful buoyancy is most eloquently described in 2 Corinthians 4. “For it is God who said Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed”. No wonder then, that just as the New Testament speaks of the Christian experience of *peace* as something that surpasses all understanding, so it speaks of the Christian experience of *joy* as beyond description, full of glory (1 Peter 1:18).

When we turn to the Gospel accounts, we find that joy was a recurring theme in the teaching and actions of Jesus as well. He was frequently found at the table of tax collectors and sinners, celebrating with the down and outs, the bag ladies and addicts, their inclusion in God’s renewing and restoring work. The disciples were beneficiaries of this reality too. Luke reports that when the seventy returned from their preaching mission, they “returned with joy, saying, Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!” Jesus responded by explaining that they have been given access to his own unique authority over spiritual evil, but he told them not to rejoice in their power but

rather to rejoice that their names were written in heaven. Then, addressing God in prayer, Jesus himself rejoiced in the Holy Spirit that God had drawn such marginal and insignificant people into the orbit of God's saving revelation.

Of course, joy does not do the whole job. It must be complemented by self-control, courage, goodness, kindness, faithfulness and patience. Discipleship is difficult, as Mennonites are fond of stressing and rightly so. Jesus constantly warned his hearers that following him would involve hardship, persecution and suffering. There is a cost to discipleship, just as there was a cost to messiah-ship for Jesus, and it is a cost we must freely and repeatedly choose to embrace.

But when we do - when we sell our investment in the world as it is and buy property in God's new order - we get a free promotional gift along with our purchase. We get joy, the joy of being joined with Jesus and his people and filled with the Spirit. It is a joy capable of sustaining us through the darkest of times because it is constantly replaced by the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). Let us pray...