

Rejoice in the Lord Always / Evening Service

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

- [0 : 00] Lord, speak to us that we may speak in loving echoes of your tone. And this night, win your words that they may reach the hidden depths of every heart, which is your home.
- Amen. In the book Exuberance, subtitled The Passion for Life by K. Redfield Jameson, it begins in these words.
- It is a curious request to make of God. Shield your joyous ones, asks the Anglican prayer. Shield your joyous ones?
- God is more usually asked to watch over those who are ill or in despair. As indeed the rest of the prayer makes clear. Watch now those who weep this day, it goes.
- Rest your weary ones. Soothe your suffering ones. The joyous tend to be left to their own devices. The exuberant even more so.
- [1 : 11] Well, in actual fact, this phrase or petition, shield your joyous ones and everything that was read after that that follows, is not actually an Anglican prayer.
- It's a prayer that was written and used by Augustine of Hippo. But who am I to differ with Augustine of Hippo on this? And even so, K. Redfield Jameson, who is a professor of psychology at John Hopkins University and also at an English department in St. Andrews of Scotland.
- Well, nevertheless, it draws our attention, I think, to something that we're less inclined to think about or believe or discuss. And namely, that's joy, except actually at this time of the year as we approach Christmas.
- Right now, when we think about Christmas, that's, of course, the first coming of Jesus Christ. But we're still in this season of Advent where we're anticipating, expecting, kind of longing for Jesus' second coming.
- So we're still on this kind of practice, this discovery of these disciplines during the season of Advent. And let me just review them with you for a minute here. Four weeks ago, we started out with the one of love.
- [2 : 26] I don't know if you remember that, but it came from Romans chapter 13, where we were exhorted to love one another. The week after that was Romans 15. And in that case, we were exhorted to abound in hope.
- That's the second Advent discipline, hope. And then a week ago, Aaron used a different text, but the one that was prescribed for that day came from 1 Corinthians chapter 4.
- And in that case, we were exhorted in chapter 4 not to judge, to judge not. And the basis of that was actually faith. Because we're justified by faith, then we don't actually judge one another.
- And this week, we're exhorted right from the beginning, chapter 4, verse 4, to rejoice in the Lord. So, stay with me here for a minute. So, the first week we had love.
- The second week we had hope. The third week we had faith. And this week we have joy. Let me give you kind of a picture to hold this all together. It's like a plant. So, imagine that you have the shoot, or the trunk of a tree, which is hope.

- [3 : 32] Which is rooted in faith. And it actually gives a result, or the result of that, or the fruit of that is love. So, you have hope in the middle, faith in the bottom, love at the top.
- And now this week we actually come to joy. So, you have this plant, kind of as it were, of these three things. And I think that if love is the fruit of this plant that's rooted in faith, then joy is like the fragrance of that fruit of love.
- So, just hold that in your mind tonight as we're thinking of joy as a discipline, or a practice during this season. And I'm really thankful that we can actually rejoice in the Lord, or as we're kind of exhorted in this passage, to do so always, as the Apostle puts it.
- It's a bit of a practice. And I know that for some of us, when we think of joy, or we think of rejoicing, we might think of that as some kind of discipline. But I think joy is practiced, and can be practiced, by all of us.
- All of us can then rejoice. So, let's look at this subject of rejoicing then. We'll look at it in these three ways to follow.
- [4 : 46] I think in this text today, we'll see that rejoicing is reasonable, or gentle. That it's prayerful, or grateful. And it's also peaceful. So, these three things then.
- Now, joy is a major theme in Paul's letter to the Philippians. He tells the church, not only in chapter 4, but also back in chapter 3, verse 1, that we should, and we can, rejoice.
- He says, finally, rejoice at the beginning of that chapter. But ten times throughout the letter, he uses this word, rejoice, or joy. It's a major theme throughout. Now, what is the word joy, or rejoice?
- The word joy comes from the same word that we use for grace, and also glory. And so, grace and joy are related to one another.
- They're connected with one another. And so, it's this grace of God that actually brings joy, or causes joy to erupt in our life. It induces joy in our life.
- [5 : 51] And so, Paul urges the church, rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice. So, what does it look like to rejoice, or how do we express this joy?
- It's not what we think, I think, as we look at what Paul has to say. After his general remark from the beginning, he says, let your reasonableness be known to everyone.
- When I hear that, I think, Paul, are you serious? Do you really mean that? Do you know what you've just said? What about my own circumstances? Circumstances may be a betrayal, or loss, or suffering, or pain, or adversity.
- Paul, I think, doesn't deny or dismiss any of those kinds of circumstances in our life. So, in other words, Paul isn't actually saying something like this, which is, you know, I think some of the ways, actually, our culture comes and approaches suffering, and difficulties, and adversity.
- So, he's not saying things like this. He's saying, well, life is difficult, and then you die. A kind of a cynical, or a pessimistic approach. He's not saying, well, okay, so-ra, so-ra.
- [7 : 03] Just roll with the punches. A kind of fatalistic approach. Nor is he saying, well, what doesn't kill me will make me stronger. You know, kind of the heroic approach to suffering.
- And neither does he say, well, just grin and bear it. It's kind of the optimistic approach to it. No, he's not denying that life is difficult, that there's suffering in it. But I think what Paul is saying, that we can rejoice in the midst of suffering, because suffering is reasonable.
- It's actually gentle. That's another word that's used for it that isn't rendered here. And it's our Lord who personified this joy, that is expressed in gentleness when he said this.
- He said, take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle, and lowly, or joyful in heart. And you will find rest for your souls.

And so we rejoice in the Lord when our souls are at rest with the gentle one. The one who is reasonable. Paul's explanation for this practice, as you follow down through the next phrase, is that the Lord is at hand.

[8 : 21] That is to say, Jesus isn't actually all that far away. He's right there with you. This is where he has actually, I think, advent in mind. The coming of our Lord. Our Lord has come.

He is coming. And with the Lord having come once, and coming again, then we have actually every reason to rejoice as we anticipate his coming.

This one who is gentle, and lowly in heart. Therefore we can rejoice. Which is why I think what's kind of surprising here. Because we think of rejoicing, or someone who's joyful, as being kind of an extrovertedly exuberant kind of person.

But you don't actually have to be that way, to be filled with the joy of the Lord, and to express that joy by rejoicing. Let me give you an example of a reasonable or gentle expression of joy from literature.

Do you remember the opening scene of the book, *The Two Towers*, from the *Lord of the Ring* trilogy? Gandalf is a wizard who appears on the scene, and he's met with delight and joy at his arrival.

[9 : 27] Later that night, there's this great celebration of rejoicing. Gandalf, in the spirit of the celebration, gently and reasonably, pulls out some fireworks, and fires them, shoots them off.

Now, those of you who know the story know what follows next, don't you? And there are these kind of unreasonable, four clumsy hobbits, who find the fireworks, and from the bin, start setting them off themselves.

In what I think is kind of an anti-joyful way. Well, later in the story, the narrator says this, in the thoughts of Pippin, about Gandalf.

The quote begins this way, Pippin glanced in some wonder at the face now close beside his own. For the sound of that laugh had been gay and merry.

Yet in the wizard's face, he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow. Though as he looked more intently, he perceived that under all, there was great joy.

[10 : 34] A fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing were it to gush forth. And so Gandalf's rejoicing exuded a gentle fragrance of joy.

Well, then after inviting us to express our reasonableness or gentleness to all people, then Paul follows then, issuing a bit of a warning then about joy, and then to follow, or preceding that actually, about anxiety.

Paul states this, in setting us up for what else joy looks like. He says, don't be anxious about anything. I know that's easier said than done, isn't it?

But I don't think Paul is talking about clinically diagnosed anxiety here. That's not what he has in mind. I will say that I think that Paul's prescription that follows is essential for any kind of anxiety.

Paul may have in mind the anxiety that the church might have over his current state. You see, Paul is in prison. And the church actually may be quite anxious and think that for some reason, his imprisonment steals the joy away from Christianity.

[11 : 52] And Paul knows our circumstances don't determine our ability to rejoice or the church in Philippi.

And in fact, sometimes adverse circumstances may deepen our joy and ability to express that through rejoicing. Well, how can this be, you may ask?

Well, Paul asserts this. He says, But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Paul contrasts anxiety with prayer and his petitions and supplications.

And I know that the hardest thing to do when we're anxious sometimes is to pray for others or about our own circumstances. But notice these two things that Paul's talking about, I think, with respect to prayer in relation to anxiety.

So that the joy of the Lord that's in us can be expressed through rejoicing. And the first is this. That the church, plural, is addressed in this command. Paul says, Let your request, your request, plural, be made known.

[13 : 04] Anxiety and joy are not individual affairs. Both kind of feed off of one another. And when another person is anxious, pay attention to the other people around that person.

But also, when someone's joyful, pay attention to other people around that person. And so Paul is saying, Pray to the Lord. Bring your prayers, your petitions to the Lord.

Where prayer is not us using conversation to get God to give us what we want. But prayer is God using that conversation to give us what He wants us to have.

Sometimes, what God wants to give us then is His presence. That's what He really wants for us. Other times, it's His power. And sometimes, He wants to bring His promises to bear in our life.

So He wants to give us, through prayer, the presence of Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit. And the promises of a father to His children. This is the first thing.

[14 : 06] He's bringing it all to us. To us as a church. The second thing to pay attention to or note here is actually about Thanksgiving. What kind of prayer does the Lord like most?

Along with prayers of praise and petition and penitence, I figure that the Lord really digs Thanksgiving. This Thanksgiving brings God's presence right into our life.

This word that Paul uses is the same word that churches like to use for the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. The word actually comes from the word Eucharist. None of us know that word.

So Paul is actually saying here, do Eucharist. Not actually the Lord's Supper or Communion. But he's saying, give thanks to the Lord. But notice he's saying, but in everything we can give thanks.

Now I know that that's hard to imagine. But we don't and can't do that on our own. And so Paul knows that and addresses the whole church inviting this whole people gathered to express the joy that's inside of them and rejoicing to the Lord.

[15 : 22] Now let me give you an example from the sports world. I gave you one from literature. Here's one that's current from this past week. Past week there was a sportscaster, a journalist, by the name of Craig Sager who died.

Some of you may have heard of that event. Sager, I figure, was kind of the Don Cherry of the NBA. You guys know who Don Cherry is, right?

You probably don't know who Craig Sager is. But just imagine there is a kind of a Don Cherry in the United States of the NBA. The night after he died of his battle with cancer, Steve Kerr, the head coach of the 2015 NBA champions.

Before the jump ball of the home game, Kerr referred to Sager in these words, that he had a great zest for life and passion and joy.

And then he invited the crowd not to a moment of silence, but to a moment of joy. Imagine that. I figure that we as Christians have this joy of the Lord that as together we can express that to the Lord in rejoicing through thanksgiving.

[16 : 36] Even more so than that crowd that was gathered there that night. This night, we too can express that joy. And when we do, that exudes this fragrance of joyfulness.

Well, then the third thing then, with respect to joy and rejoicing is that there is something very peaceful about it. Now, while gratefulness as an expression of rejoicing may not have come as a surprise to us, reasonableness or gentleness probably is.

This next one, peace, I gather again is something of a surprise for us. And so Paul continues his thoughts in these words. He says, and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I wonder what you think is the most important word in this section here in verse 7. The key word is just a really small one and it is in.

Joy is expressed as peace when our hearts and minds are in Christ Jesus. At the beginning, at the end of verse 4 and 7 is this word in.

[17 : 51] In the Lord and in Christ. It's a small word with really big significance. And we have to go back to chapter 3 beginning at verse 8 to really appreciate this.

And really, in some ways, up to this point, everything that I'm telling you is kind of a salvation by works. Doing things out of maybe duty. But it really needs to be rooted in grace if it's to be the joy of the Lord that comes to us and that we express.

Look at me with chapter 3 verse 8. Paul says this. This is a great synthesis of the gospel. I count everything as lost because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ.

A righteousness from God that depends on faith that I may know him in the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death.

[19 : 06] That by means any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead. See salvation equals knowing Jesus our Lord when we are in him and he is in us.

Look at what Paul says. He talks about gaining Christ that's about being in him. He talks about being found in him. Faith in Christ which depends on faith again in Christ.

Becoming like him in his death. And then he talks about suffering and sharing and becoming and attaining. It's all about being in Christ. And so this is a grace based salvation which expresses itself which comes into us through the peace of the Lord and then inducing and causing us to express that by rejoicing.

Well what about this small word with a big impact I think. This little word in. What does it mean? Just two things. First it means that we're united with Christ and then it means we're actually into him.

In means that we have union with our Lord. We have this peace because he is in us and we are in him. Another way to put it in our kind of day and age that maybe gets the point across is that we're actually synced with Christ.

[20 : 33] Christ is synced with us. It's that kind of technical term. You know we sync our desktop or our notebook with our handheld device. We're those two items are in sync with one another.

This is what I think Paul is saying something similar to that. That we have peace with God when we're in sync with Christ. The image that our Lord uses is actually the one of the vine and the branches. That the branches in the vine and of course the vine holds the branch.

It's in union with that. And when we do we actually have this peace. Which shows forth in joy. That's the first thing. But the second thing is that it's also about in means into.

Because I think in as we think about that isn't actually quite strong enough. When we're into something we're absolutely dependent upon what it is that we're into.

And I think that Jesus was really into people. And what he wants is for us to be really into him. We can be into a whole range of things in life but Paul I think expresses this really captures this really powerful earlier in the letter when he says to live is Christ and to die is gain.

[21 : 50] What is it that we live for? What is it that we die for? Well let me give you one last illustration tonight then. And this one is from health care.

This past week the Conference Board of Canada released its first ever health ranking of ten major cities. Now the good news is that Vancouver actually has the best physical health.

We're the most healthy of these ten cities across the country. It's important to note though that Winnipeg actually the residents there have the best access to health care.

So we're healthy even though we don't have as good as access to health care as those in Winnipeg. But here's the bad news. The bad news is that the residents of Vancouver report the lowest sense of satisfaction.

Our bodies can be so well but our emotions our souls our relationships lack some kind of satisfaction joy well-being wholeness.

[22 : 57] well here's what Paul is saying that the Lord is promising us. He's saying that the peace of God which passes all understandings can guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus giving us that life satisfaction that peacefulness that wholeness and so rejoicing in the Lord means that we express this fragrance of joy as we know God's peace.

Let me end very simply then with this. I think that there is a fragrance to joy. It's reasonable it's grateful it's peaceful and Paul states that this joy transcends or surpasses all understanding.

In other words this fragrance of joy goes beyond a bouquet of flowers a smell of freshly baked bread an aroma of a finest wine or a scent let's say of a really tall pine tree.

But better than joy it doesn't just have a fragrance I think joy has a face and the face of joy is you and it's me because the face of joy is Jesus Christ in you and me.

so this night let's rejoice in the Lord. I say it again rejoice. Speak to you in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 35] Amen.