

Forty Days of Joy: Rejoice!

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Song of Solomon 1:4b

Draw me, we will run after you; the king has brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine; the upright love thee. (King James Version)

Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

What is 2020 going to be like for you? If you have your resolutions in mind, you know what you're going to accomplish, what you're going to do. You've already started on it, I'm sure. Some of us are going to lose weight. I don't see anyone else raising their hand but that's all right. Some of us are going to exercise more. Some of us are going to go to bed earlier and get more sleep. Some of us are going to watch less TV and some of us are going to play with our phones less and scroll through social media less. Some of us are going to be better friends and some of us are going to stay in touch with other people better or write letters or read more. I don't know what you're going to do for 2020. You've decided.

There's a passage in James 4 that I've always loved. He says, "Come now, to you who say today or tomorrow you will go to such and such a town and spend a year there doing business and making money. Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring." You've got no clue what you're going to accomplish in 2020. You don't know what tomorrow will bring.

What's the Yiddish proverb? It says, "Man plans - God laughs!" We make these plans; we decide what we're going to do. We say, "I've made these plans, I'm going to accomplish this sort of thing."

Recently, maybe about a month ago, I did my annual professional assessment with our Staff Parish Relations Committee. All our staff have an evaluation or assessment every year. We look at the goals for the year ahead and we look at the goals we set a year ago. I sat down and did my assessment for the year ahead and looked at last year's goals. I didn't do so well on last year's

goals. There were some Cs and Ds there as I graded myself on having accomplished what I'd set out to accomplish.

But as I looked, I realized I that I'd been silly to try and accomplish that after what happened, happened in different ways. There were other things that led to different decisions, moving in a different direction and trying something new instead of trying what I said I was going to try. We've got to be able to adapt to what comes down the pike, right? We don't know what tomorrow will bring. I can sit there in December of 2019 and say what I want to accomplish in 2020 but who knows what tomorrow will bring?

There's a famous prayer you know of I'm sure. You've seen it on posters and memes everywhere. It's often called the Serenity Prayer. It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr who was a great theologian from Union Theological Seminary for decades. In fact, if you read his books, they're deep. They're thick - that's the best way I can say it. This prayer isn't. It says, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Now it's the second half of it that has much more power for me, and many of us don't know this part. It says, "Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking as Jesus did this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the life to come."

We don't know what tomorrow's going to bring so what can we decide? This passage today, this brief verse from the Song of Solomon, is a peculiar verse to preach on in many ways. The Song of Solomon is a love poem, it's racy, and juicy. But it's included in our canon, our Bible as a celebration of human love, but also to be used as a metaphor for our relationship with God, of how God loves us passionately and has this deep driving desire to be with us, and how we are to have that same driving desire to be with Jesus.

He begins with these words: "*I will - I will* - be glad and rejoice in you, in God. *I will* remember your love more than wine." That's a lot of remembering for me. "Remember your love more than wine." *I will*. That's a statement of resolve.

You see, there are some things we can control. We can't control what happens to us, but we can control our attitude.

Viktor Frankl in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning* has perhaps his most famous quote. "The last of the great human freedoms is the freedom to determine one's own attitude in any given circumstance." The freedom to choose one's own way, to decide how we're going to respond, what will be our attitude, no matter what comes down the pike. I *will* - it's a resolve to remember and rejoice.

I love that word *resolve*. Let me define it. Resolve is a decision to make a particular decision in a certain way every day. Tomorrow and the next day and the next day. That's what a resolution is - that's what *resolve* means.

When we do a wedding service, the couple comes forward and we begin with what are called the vows of intent. I look at the bride or the groom or someone and I say, "Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together in the holy state of matrimony, etc. etc." And their answer often is "I do," which isn't the right answer. That's not what's in the liturgy and what I coach them to say. Their answer is, "I will." The movies have them saying "I do." But it's easy to do it right then. Of course, you're going to do it right then. You're right in this wedding ceremony, you're deeply in love, so of course you're going to do it. But what about tomorrow and the next day and the next, a year from now or ten years from now. "I will" is a resolve that "I'm going to love you and cherish you every day forever." That is resolve.

So, the first "R" I want you to remember is this word *resolve*. Resolution is a decision about the attitude that you will take every day, a decision that you'll make tomorrow and the next day and the next.

So, what are we resolving? Well, let's begin with this word *remember*. He says, "I will remember thy love more than wine." Now let me be transparent here. This single verse from Song of Solomon I shared with you out of the King James Version for a particular reason. This passage came from a sermon that was preached by Charles Spurgeon, a famous Baptist preacher in 1886 on the Lord's Day, April 4 and the sermon is called "Remembering and Rejoicing." And Charles Spurgeon used the King James Version, it was the only Bible they had. Almost every translation now translates this word *remember*. In fact, I've not found a single one aside from the King James Version that does. It's often translated *exult*, or *celebrate*, or *be glad*. But for some reason the King James translated it *remember*. I figure if it's good enough for Charles Spurgeon it's good enough for me.

What does it mean to *remember* God's love? I hope as we begin this 75th anniversary of St. Luke's that you'll go out into this hallway by the Sanctuary and take some time, come during the week, or early for church, and just look there. Our marvelous communications team has done a timeline all along the wall with photos and all sorts of wonderful remembrances of what God has done through and in the lives of the people of St. Luke's over the last 75 years. There's a list of the charter members of the church. It's just marvelous.

As I walk down that display and see all of that, I'm just overwhelmed remembering. And some things I didn't even know before. Remembering what God has done. It's tinged with a little bit of pride, but it's mostly humility that I – that we - you and I - get to be a part of that. That we are a part of this procession of saints, regular folks, nothing special about them, whom God used to do incredible things with his love. And we get to be a part of that. That's amazing that they've handed this to us. This special treasure of the Gospel at work in this city with these people and then said, "Okay, it's your turn. What are you going to do?" Then we get to take that and carry it forward. I'm humbled by that. To remember God's love.

Since my mom passed away and we were planning her memorial service, my daughters wanted to do a photo slide show for the reception in the Fellowship Hall. They sent me up into the attic to get the tub that's full of the photo albums. Let me tell you that my wife is a "tub person." We have maybe a thousand tubs in the attic of things that no one will ever look at again, but they're up there. This one I guess we are going to look at again. So, I bring this tub down and it has my mom's photo albums in it. Even things her mom had given her. We got all those out and looked at the pictures.

First of all, why say in 1939 did no one ever smile in a photo? These are all the pictures - everyone's so somber. I don't know if that was just the tradition to not smile. But as I looked at all the times when my mom is a child and then me as a child. Then my sisters my brother and sister and my mom and then my step father and my dad. All of these photos that are there, here was my overwhelming feeling.

I'm going to be honest with you - I don't have a really good memory. My wife will tell you that she has to remind me of everything. But as I looked back, it just brought these memories flooding back, and the overwhelming feeling was just goodness. Just the goodness of God in the midst of all of this.

It isn't that there weren't hard times. My parents divorced, my sister died, and she was an addict before that. My uncle and aunt died, and their kids came to live with us. We had all sorts of challenges. But when I look back, what I think of is goodness.

And I think that's the way it's supposed to be. We look back and we admit, yeah, I'm romanticizing this. Yes, it was so good when I looked back but I'm sure there were lots of challenges. I think that's the way it's supposed to be because the thing we want to carry forward is not how hard life is. The thing we want to carry forward is the goodness of God, just how good God is. "I will remember thy love more than wine."

When Jesus is going to the cross, do you know what he was worried about? He was worried that we'd forget - forget him, what he did and how much he loved us. So, he instituted the Lord's Supper. He said, "When you eat, and drink remember me." "I will remember thy love more than wine."

Now here's the other "R." So we have Resolve, we've got Remember, and the last one is Rejoice. He says, "We will be glad and rejoice in you."

As we begin these 40 days of joy - It's interesting last year was our year of gratitude and everyone wrote 365 notes... what? Okay, well one or two of us wrote 365 notes of gratitude. And most of us wrote a bunch of notes of gratitude. One of our staff members sent me this quote, "It is not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful." It's so natural that we'd move from a time for focusing on gratitude and 40 days of joy, because that gratitude leads to this joy within us.

I think joy is both a fruit of the spirit as the Scripture tells us. The fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness etc. Those are the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, but they're also a result of the decision to do the things that open us to that Spirit working within us, and a decision to daily remember what God's done and to choose joy, to choose to rejoice.

Speaking of remembering, Pastor Abby Odio reminded me of J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. When I was in middle school, I read it voraciously, I was a nerd before the Tolkien Hobbit and the *Lord of the Rings*. She reminded me of the third book of the trilogy called *The Return of the King*. It's all full of Christian symbolism. Tolkien was a Christian writer. He and C.S. Lewis were buddies and they would talk together about faith. We were just talking before the service that Tolkien thought that Lewis was too obvious in the Narnia books, that he needed to be a little more subtle like Tolkien was in the *Lord of the Rings*.

In the third book they're trying to destroy this ring of power. It's not going well. Gandolph is the wizard and all throughout is the one who ties it all together. He's the wise one and these Hobbits have all played their part. The armies are gathered around, and it looks like they're going to lose and it's just bad. Then Gandolph begins to laugh and laugh and laugh. Here's what Tolkien writes: "Pippin [he was one of the Hobbits] 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 a great joy. A fountain of great mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing were it to gush forth." That in Christ within us at our core there is a fountain of joy, and no matter the circumstance of our life, no matter the grief we feel or the sadness, there is this joy. We're going to celebrate in good times.

Yesterday the Texans come back with a big win - that's amazing! That's a resurrection! It's easy to be joyous then. But when you lose, when things don't go well, when circumstances are not so good, there's still a fountain of joy at the core of who you are that we choose to live out of and dwell out of. Let's get clear, that fountain of joy is built upon this relationship that we know of Christ's love for us.

I mentioned C.S. Lewis. Here's his story. He grew up in a very rigid Christian family. He pushed that away and rejected it. He became a very thoughtful atheist for a part of his life. But he wrote a book called *Surprised by Joy* and in there he said it was the experience of joy that led him back to faith. That he could not identify any other source of that joy that transcends circumstances than Christ in his heart. That's the essence.

This sermon that this is based on today, Spurgeon closes his sermon with these words. "May God bless you my dear friends. I wish that all of you understood the truth of which I have been speaking. Some of you do not. May the Lord lead you to do so, for there is no life like what is spent at Jesus' feet. And no joy like what comes from our dear Lord. I wish you knew it. Believe in him and you shall know it. You shall know it at once. Amen."

I wish that for you. That as we begin this year that you would know that joy that comes from that fountain of the presence of Christ, the source at the core of your life.

So, what will you do in 2020? Lose some weight? Go for it! Sleep more! Go for it! Work harder, be a better friend, work less hard, watch less TV, play less with your phone - do all those things. But resolve every day to remember God's love for you and rejoice in it.

More words from Spurgeon's sermon and I'll close with these. "What a shame it is that we ever forget him. His name should be so deeply inscribed upon our hearts that we could not forget him. Let us remember his love for surely if there is anything that we ought ever to remember it's that undying love which is our choicest portion on earth. And which will be the main constituent of our highest bliss in heaven. Then, by the help of God's Spirit, let us make this resolve at this moment whatever we may do when we get out of this building; let us resolve to stand by this double declaration. We will rejoice and we will remember. Amen."

Let us pray. *Gracious and loving God, who knows what tomorrow will bring? We don't know what our circumstances will be, what we'll have to face, what good things will come our way, what challenges we'll have to face. But we do know that we can decide how we will respond, what our attitude will be no matter what comes. So, God, awaken within us that resolve to remember your love that has brought us so far already, and to rejoice in your presence at the very core of who we are. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.*