

## Forty Days of Joy: Enjoy!

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Genesis 2:8-9; 15-17; 1 Timothy 4:4-5

*And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2:8-9 (NRSV)*

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Genesis 2:15-17 (NRSV)*

*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer. 1 Timothy 4:4-5 (NRSV)*

Join with me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words, and open our hearts, God, that we might feel, and our compassion might be renewed. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

Many years ago as a youth pastor we took our young people on an annual retreat with youth from all over the Annual Conference. We went to Lakeview Methodist Assembly to what we called a mid-winter retreat. We had a speaker, and worship and stuff. I don't think they do it anymore but in those days, they had a dance on Saturday night. It was the big deal there.

We always took many kids and some of their friends would come along with them. We were at that retreat and we couldn't find one of the girls who was actually a visitor who'd come with someone else. We couldn't find her, and I was upset until finally someone said, "Well, she's up at the chapel." So I went to Peace Chapel and there she was, praying fervently

at the altar. I was afraid something was terribly the matter, so I went to talk to her. She said, "Well, the problem is that I'm Southern Baptist and we don't dance, and this dance is coming up and I don't know what to do." I asked, "So are you trying to pray about whether you should come and dance or not." Then she said, "No, I'm going to come and dance. I'm just praying to see if it's right or wrong for me to come and dance."

I kind of laughed at that but at the same time I realized that how much of the time that's how we live our lives. We think to ourselves, "I know what I'm going to do; I just have to figure out how to make the Bible say what I want it to." So we can do that.

Now I'm one who believes firmly and enthusiastically in dancing. I don't dance. I used to when I was younger, but when the first of my daughters was to get married Dee and I took dancing lessons. It didn't take. It really was very sad. I just don't dance. But I believe in dancing.

King David danced half naked down the road as they brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. He was celebrating and his wife looked out the window and saw him and the Scripture says, "She was disgusted." But that's how King David was, he celebrated and danced.

Now dancing is just one example of something that I think is perhaps the greatest temptation. Not the greatest temptation but one temptation of religion, and that is an obsession with what *not* to do. Just that we get so focused and think about how religion says, "Don't do this - don't dance, don't drink, don't cuss!" There is so many "don'ts" that are just there.

This passage, the single verse we read from 1 Timothy is where Paul is writing to Timothy. Judaism at that time was really focused on not eating certain foods, not touching certain people, not touching certain things, on just staying clean and holy by removing yourself from things of the world. Unclean things.

Paul's writing to Timothy is saying, "That's not who we are as Christians! Everything that comes down from heaven from God, everything, is good, and to be received with thanksgiving, sanctified by God's word and prayer. It's good!"

Now take this passage that you're familiar with from Genesis 2. If I were to ask you "What's that passage about? Give me one sentence or phrase that that passage is about?" And you might say, "That was the time that Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the fruit they weren't supposed to eat." That would be your explanation of this Scripture.

Well, that's part of it. But let me tell you that when you read the whole thing it's so much more than that, because it begins with permission. It begins with a God who creates a world of delight. The word Eden - the Garden of Eden - in Hebrew is the word for pleasure. The garden of pleasure. A garden of delight.

How does the Scripture say it? "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food... And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.'" Permission.

Why is it that we don't enjoy the blessings God has given us? We talked about it in our meeting of the worship team. Some said it's because of guilt. We feel guilty that we should be working or doing something productive and if we're just going to enjoy something that's just not good enough, "Shouldn't we be making a difference?" Or we feel guilty that we have so much, and others have so little, so we feel guilty that we've got more than our share somehow. Or maybe the flip side. We look around at what others are experiencing and they're going on vacation to Cabo San Lucas and we think, "How am I supposed to enjoy just going bowling?" We kind of compare ourselves to others. I don't know what it is, but what's clear is that it is sin that breaks that enjoyment. That's not how God made us. God made us to enjoy.

Let me tell you three reasons why I think we're commanded to enjoy life, to enjoy the blessings that God has given to us.

Here's the first one - in those blessings we see a reflection of who God is - of God. All of creation God made. We sing it - "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, the Lord God made them all."

We see in those things a reflection of God. Now there's a strain of Christianity that's called Celtic Christianity that says God is actually *in* those things, that God inhabits the creature. I have to say that's not where I go with my theology. I think the Scripture is clear that there is a distinction between *creator* and *creature*, between *creator* and *creation*. Between the one who does the creating and the one who is *created*.

But I do think that we look at what God has made for us to enjoy and we see a reflection of God in that. Let me give you an example. I've been going through my mother's stuff as she's passed away. I look at those things and I see letters she's written, and just notes that I've been looking at about how to get in touch with maybe her benefits people. There's a phone number and I see her handwriting there. That's a reflection of her. It's not her, but I love it

because it reflects her. Or the quilts and afghans that she made for my children and my grandchildren. I don't particularly like quilts and afghans, they're not my thing. But I really love those because I see in them a reflection of her.

When we experience what God has made all around us, we catch a glimpse, just a glimpse, of God in them as a reflection.

Now the second reason I think we're commanded to enjoy is sort of tied to that, because in our enjoyment God gets God's greatest enjoyment.

At Christmas time, what's your favorite part of exchanging gifts at Christmas? I suspect if you're like most of us your favorite part is when someone opens a gift from you. It's not when you get a gift, but when someone opens a gift that you've given. And when you see them take delight in it, they say, "Oh, man! I've got to try this on!" or when you see a child tear off the paper and say "Oh, I'm excited! I want to play with this!" You see them playing with it and having so much fun with it, you're just so full of joy.

David Horton, one of our pastors at the Gethsemane campus, got sick so he couldn't fly home to be with his parents this Christmas. They used Facetime to show his daughter opening the presents that his parents had sent. He said that to watch their faces as their daughter Caroline opened those presents, just to watch their joy in that. God takes joy in watching our joy, watching us enjoy what God has given us.

Let me put a finer point on it and flip it around, what it is like when you give someone something and they open it and you say, "Oh, thank you" and then just put it down. There's no joy in that, sometimes we choose not to enjoy or can't seem to figure out how to enjoy what God has given us, the moments, the times, the experiences.

Here's the third reason I think it's important that we're commanded. This is a little simpler and maybe a little bit more personal. It's that life is short, and you reach a point in your life. When we do memorial services - all of our pastors do that - and every time I do one, I think to myself as the Scripture talks about how we face our own mortality in the liturgy of the service, I think that someday that's going to be me. There's not that much time left - there really isn't. I look back at what I've already experienced in 60 years of life, and I think "Gosh, I missed so much of it! It went by so fast and it just buzzed on by! I didn't take hold of it and I didn't enjoy it, and by golly, I'm not going to do that with the rest of my life!" It's that it was given as a gift and I want to take hold of it and enjoy it.

Those are the reasons I think God commands us to freely eat of the trees of the garden and to enjoy them. It's as if God is saying, "You, on behalf of the body of Christ in this place, I give you permission to enjoy life!"

Now there is that one tree and it does say, "And of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat for in the day of it you shall surely die." The day you eat of it you shall die. So there's permission but there's also boundaries. There are edges to that freedom.

In my years in ministry I've come to believe that while sometimes it may look wonderful on the other side of that boundary, it may look awesome over there, what's really over there is pain. The boundaries were given not to hurt us or deprive us but were given to us for our joy, because what's over there is pain and hurt. And if we recognize boundaries - guard rails if you will - then we can more freely experience the rest of life that's not beyond the boundaries.

Thomas Harper pointed me to a study that was every interesting. They did a study with preschool children and playgrounds. They took a preschool children's group to a playground that was placed out in the middle of an open field. They watched how the children played and they noticed that the children would stay close to that play structure and close to the teacher who was with them. They took another group to another playground that was surrounded by a fence. It was a big playground, but it had a fence around it, and they watched while the children played freely. Let me read the conclusion to the study, "With the boundary, in this case the fence, the children felt at ease to explore the space. They were able to separate from the caregiver and continue to develop in their sense of self while still recognizing that they were in a safe environment within the limits of the fence."

Our boundaries are there for our joy.

So we have permission and we have boundaries. But the third thing I think has been most significant for me this year as I studied about what it meant to enjoy. Listen to verse 15: "The Lord God took the man and he put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." Now I have always understood that verse to mean that God created us to work. That we had vocation, we had purpose in our life and that we are put here with a reason. I still believe that - I still think it says that. But this year I read it in a different way. I'm to till and keep this garden of delight. You have to cultivate joy; you have to work at it. As silly as it sounds, joy is sometimes to *enjoy*, something you have to cultivate in your life.

Let me give you three practices. I was thinking to myself; how does one do that? What are the real things one does to cultivate that? Practices. Here are three I thought of and maybe you can think of some more.

One is cultivating friendships, relationships. Your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, your cousins, your co-workers, your neighbors, your friends. Those are relationships that are a gift given to you and they don't take care of themselves. They have to be nurtured and cultivated and worked out and invested in.

Yesterday we had the memorial service for John Duncan. I told you last week that he was in hospice care, and he passed away last weekend. The service was here yesterday. His son Johnny told a story about how John had recently called a member of our church, a man named Mac Dunwoody, and invited him to lunch. Now Mac is younger than John, and he didn't know him well. He was a little surprised to get the call about going to lunch. So Mac thought maybe it was a business deal he was going to propose or something he wasn't sure. Then when they sat down to lunch John said, "Mac, I'm old and my friends are all dying. And I need some younger friends. So would you be my friend? I'd like for you to be my friend if you would accept this offer." Mac said, "Of course I accept the offer."

Let me ask you this question - when was the last time you made a new friend? You know, my mom used to tell me, "You have to make a new friend, they don't happen, you have to go make them." When was the last time you made a new friend - cultivated a new relationship? Enjoy the life that God's given you by cultivating the friendships, the relationships.

Here's the second idea. Learn to practice presence. There are all sorts of fancy words for this. You could call it mindfulness, concentration, or focus. But the idea is how can you be fully present in the moment you are in, and not think about where else you could be. I must tell you I'm terrible at this. I'm really bad. I'm preaching to myself here. I must tell you that these little gizmos - my cell phone - aren't helpful to that. In fact I have emails now - maybe I should check those. That's the way it works.

One of my daughters when she and her friends go out, they have a deal where they have to put their phones in the middle of the table and whoever picks up their phone first has to pay the bill. I like this - it's pretty good.

To demonstrate my age I love a song by the New Christy Minstrels. They were a folk group from the 1960s and maybe you know the song. It goes like this: "Today while the blossoms still cling to the vine, I'll taste your strawberries, I'll drink your sweet wine, And a million tomorrows may all pass away, ere I forget all the joy that is mine today." This day. To be fully present and to enjoy this moment, this day.

I don't know how for us to learn to do that except to try and work at it and pray for it. I'm resolved I'm going to do a better job of it this year. One of the things I'm doing is at the end of the night as I go to bed, to see if I can remember five moments of joy during the day. It's hard, believe it or not. But once you start doing that then during the day when something happens you think, "Hey, that will work. That'll count."

This morning the alarm goes off at 4:45 which is when I get up on Sunday mornings and I thought to myself, "I do not want to get up." My dogs came and snuggled up next to me, and I thought, "I'm just going to stay here. But oh, no, I probably won't get up. Who's going to preach - all of those things?" But I decided I was going to enjoy that moment. Just for a minute. Look for those moments and practice them.

Here's the third thing. Try it - you'll like it! This is the third practice. Decide not to wait on something. How many times do you think, "You know, I'm going to do that? One of these days I'm going to go camping more. That's something I enjoy. I'm going to go camping and get out in nature." I haven't been camping in years, or, "I'm going to read that book, I'm going to write that note, I'm going to join that club, I'm going to become a part of that project, I'm going to teach that class, I'm going to join that Bible study." And then you don't. You wait, thinking, "Someday I'm going to do that," and those days just go on past.

Miles Monroe was an evangelical preacher and he's from the Bahamas. He's a big spirited guy whose kind of loud, and it's fun to listen to him preach. He was killed in a plane crash in the Bahamas and he wrote about 60 books or something like that. But here's what he writes, "The wealthiest place in the world is not the gold mines of South America or the oil fields of Iraq or Iran. They're not the diamond mines of South Africa, or the banks of the world. The wealthiest place on the planet is just down the road. It's the cemetery. There lie buried companies that were never started, inventions that were never made, best-selling books that were never written and masterpieces that were never painted. In the cemetery is buried

the greatest treasure of untapped potential." Wow! Don't wait! Whatever it is that you feel God put on your heart to take hold of to enjoy, to experience. Someday may never come.

Next week we're going to talk about what I think may be the most important part of building joy and that's the decision to give ourselves fully to something that matters. That's the Kingdom of God, to be a part of the movement of God in the world around us, and how we experience that.

But I want to leave you today with just this one verse from Psalm 16 and it's a prayer to God. It says, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures for evermore." Enjoy them!

*Gracious God, you give us permission and yet somehow, we can't seem to take hold of the joy that you provide for us each and every day. So, God, we ask that you tune our hearts to be free to explore, to enjoy even with the weight of the world that seems to sit on our shoulders, to trust you to hold it up enough for us to experience fully each and every moment. You gave us permission, God, we take it. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.*