

Forty Days of Joy: Let It Go!

Dr. Tom Pace

February 2, 2020

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah Psalm 32 (NRSV)*

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and
slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

Ephesians 4:31-32 (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. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

Mike Richards was a conservative talk show host on the radio here in Houston and he would always close his program with the words, "And don't let anyone steal your joy!" It's kind of a benediction and I always thought it was pretty good. It just seems that in our human condition there are people and things that just steal our joy. It's not like we don't have the joy that we have the joy down in there; but it's like the other stuff that gets on top of it just impedes it or takes it away, and we need to put in some security measures to make sure that nothing steals our joy.

I told you last week about the marvelous book by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. They came together for a week to talk about joy and they had an author who recorded their conversations. It was neat that they put it together in this book just called *The Book of Joy*. And here's their list of things that can steal your joy: "Fear, stress and anxiety, frustration, sadness and grief, despair, loneliness, envy, suffering in adversity, illness, and fear of death."

I would add some other things. For me it would be conflict which is one of my main joy-stealers. It occurs when you just have that joy and there's conflict going on around you. Or another is this sense where you feel you can't control the world, that my body, all sorts of things are changing, and I can't stop it. You just can't control it and it's out of your own control and you feel that. And it steals your joy.

Now here's the thing. The Scripture never tells us that we won't have those things. They're there, but what we've been saying over the last four weeks as we've been talking about joy is that there is a source of joy that is divine. It's that relationship that we've been offered in Christ. Even with all those things going on, again, it's not that we won't have them, you're going to experience despair, and fear and anxiety. You're going to experience conflict. You're going to experience all of those things. You're going to experience grief. But the question is how we can keep them from blocking that source of joy that we have in Christ Jesus.

At memorial services we often read Romans 8, it's one of my favorite passages in Scripture. The final verses of Romans 8. I really like how Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*: "So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? ...Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture... None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us." That source of joy, the love of God, is always there. Even in the midst of grief and pain and all of those things that hurt us.

What I want us to do today is to talk about a force that is a gift from God that we can use to draw upon, to push away those joy stealers. That is the force of forgiveness, that it is a gift from God, and that if we choose to receive and accept God's forgiveness and offer that forgiveness to others, we will experience joy. That's a joyous thing to do.

Before we can really understand forgiveness and talk about it, we have to understand sin. The notion of sin - we often think of it as doing a bad thing. That is a sin, I guess. But the Christian concept is something different than that. It has to do with how we get separated from God, and the word in Greek is *hamartia* and it literally means "to miss the mark." It's a term from archery that they chose to use to say that we have missed the mark. We have fallen short of God's vision for us as a people and as individuals.

So with that in mind I want to talk about receiving forgiveness and about offering it. First, here is what I would tell you - you and I have missed the mark. I've missed the mark, you have and if you are comfortable with the word saying, "We're sinners" then we're sinners. The point is that we have not reached where God's intent for us is.

I think this comes in two ways. In one way we've done something really bad. We feel like it's really bad and we long for forgiveness for it. Just yesterday I received an email from a member of our church, and they said that they've been struggling to receive God's forgiveness for things they've done, and they just can't seem to get there. They can't seem to receive that forgiveness.

There's no easy way to receive forgiveness for those things. What happens is that we keep this guilt on our shoulders, we just carry it around. Listen to what the Scripture says, and the image is so powerful. "When I kept silence my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. Day and night your hand was heavy upon you. My strength was dried up as the heat of the summer."

Have you ever felt that way, just the guilt on your shoulders? Then it's kind of funny when the preacher tells you that you're forgiven, and you can't seem to get there, then you feel guilty about feeling guilty. It's just there on your shoulders all the time.

Here's what I would tell you - God has let it go. It is forgiven and it is forgotten. So when you push away that gift of forgiveness that God is offering, it doesn't make you a better person. You have been offered this amazing gift. Receive it - accept it! It's not an easy thing to do.

I saw the movie recently "The Two Popes." If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. It's on one of the streaming services. It's the story of Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Pope Benedict resigned the papacy and ultimately Pope Francis is elected. Before Pope Benedict resigns, they have a meeting. Actually, Francis was going to resign, and Pope Benedict wouldn't let him. It was an interesting conversation.

They formed this friendship and near the end of the movie they receive one another's confession and offer one another forgiveness. It's so interesting because Pope Benedict can't seem to receive the forgiveness of God because his heart is hard, and he can't hear God's voice anymore. Francis can't seem to receive God's forgiveness because of something he did a long ago that resulted in the harming of a number of priests - in their torture and death. And both of them are struggling to receive God's forgiveness. It's a powerful image to see them offer that forgiveness to one another. I thought to myself, "Well, if I'm having trouble, if the popes are having trouble ... then it shouldn't be a problem for me. Of course I'm having trouble if they are."

I want to push this a little further because some of us have those things, those secrets, those burdens, but for many of us it's not a sense like we've done this terrible thing we can't get over. It's just this sense that we're falling short, that we're just not what we should be, that God has poured into our lives all these good things, all these wonderful things and we've squandered them. We haven't used them as we should have, and that we're not giving ourselves away completely.

Here's the way I've often described it. That we're good Methodist Protestants and so we don't picture God dangling us over the fires of hell by a thread, and we live in fear of an angry God. We just think that God's a little disappointed in us. God looks at us and says, "Come on, Tom, you can do better than that."

I think that's where most of us walk, and here's what I would tell you. God has come down off of his throne of judgement to walk with us. God has come down to say to us, "I'm not here to judge you; I'm here to walk with you. I'm here to take you forward to where God has called us to be."

Within us that transformation that happens is now we go from a sense of guilt to a sense of gratitude and humility. We go from feeling a sense of perfectionism that we have to be the perfect parent and manage it all just perfectly to a sense that God is making progress with me. I'm not done yet.

That movement within us. It's not that now we think we can get away with anything and do anything we want to. No, we want to become better. God says, "I'm going to come with you and sanctify you and help you become." When God looks at us there's not a sense of disappointment but of compassion, a twinkle in God's eye about the possibilities in front of us.

Now there is one thing that the Scripture seems to say we need to do to receive forgiveness. That's because this can be a blocking from receiving it, and that's that we need to forgive others. We said it in the Lord's Prayer - "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If you really go into where the Scripture says it goes on: "And if you don't forgive those who have trespassed against you then you don't receive forgiveness." That's always jarred me a little bit. It's this obstacle in the way, it's a force we have for unblocking that relationship we have with God so that we can also receive forgiveness, that we would offer it.

Remember the Scripture we read a few minutes ago from the New Testament. "Put away from you all bitterness, wrath, and wrangling and slander together with all malice and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." There's this connection between us receiving forgiveness and then us offering it to others.

Again I think it comes in two ways. Big stuff and then just that general sense. When someone has wronged or hurt you, what do you do? I found a wonderful book on the Internet. I actually didn't buy it; I just liked the title. It's "Spite, Malice and Revenge: The Ultimate Guide to Getting Even, Three Diabolical Volumes in One." What's funny is when you bring it up on Amazon you know how it lists other books you might like to read. There are like five different books on how to get even. I won't even tell you on why I was looking it up. Actually, it had to do with another pastor in our conference. April Fool's Day is coming, and I have to find a way to get even is actually what that's all about.

There is again from *The Book of Joy* a different response. "'Forgiveness,' the Archbishop added, 'is the only way to heal ourselves and to be free from the past. Without forgiveness we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound to the chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us that person will hold the keys to our happiness. That person will be our jailer. But when we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberator.'"

When we forgive, we go from victim to *victor*. You have to understand that forgiveness is something that begins with the *forgiver*, not the one who's done the wrong. We think to ourselves, "Sure, they come and ask for forgiveness, I'll offer it. But they haven't even asked for forgiveness. They don't even think they've done anything wrong!" So we carry this around inside us, and we've left them in control of our hearts and lives. When we forgive, we take back control of that and we open up that sense of experiencing God's forgiveness for us.

Now I think we can forgive people for big things, but again I want to push this a bit further. So when Jesus is asked, "How many times should I forgive my brother?" he says, "Seven times seventy times." What does that mean? That means *always*. That means being in a constant state of forgiveness. "How do you do that?" What would it be like if you decided to let go of all of your expectations of other people? Think about that for a moment. If you decided that you were going to come down off your judgement seat and when you looked around at others, then you would decide that it wasn't your job to judge them.

Missy Bandy passed away a number of years ago and she was the first executive director of the Amazing Place. As we were planning her memorial service, her son Griff said something that has stuck with me. He said, "My mom just said she wasn't going to waste any of her time deciding how other people ought to run their lives." Boy, that stuck with me and partly because what I do for a living is stand up here and tell you how to run your lives. I thought to myself, "I may be wasting my life here."

Bob Goff who's a Christian writer has said, "I used to want to fix people, now I just want to be with them." I thought that was a great picture. What if we decided to let go of all our judgment of others and just love them as they are?

Now I want to be clear. I'm not saying that there's no accountability. We enter into relationships of accountability and we say, "We're in a covenant relationship, but if you decide to come to work here at St. Luke's we have things that we expect of you. And we'll hold you accountable for those things." But that's an intentional covenant we've joined in together. When you're in a family together you have a covenant with one another, and you hold one another accountable. When you're in a church family, when you join a church, we say, "This is what I'm going to do," and we hold one another accountable.

But even in situations of accountability we speak the truth with love and forgiveness is a force we use to heal the broken relationships.

What would it be like if you just let go of the judgment that you have upon yourself? The guilt, the sense of not being enough. God's already let it go. What would it be like if you let go of your critical eye toward others and just loved them as they are?

I have a friend and we were talking about how to pray. Not like what you say, but what posture you have when you're praying. When I was a kid you know you always put your hands together and you bowed your head. He said, "You know, if you open your hands, it will work better." I thought, "Work better? I don't know if it would work better."

Try this. When you pray put your hands out with palms up, and then you will experience a sense of saying, "I'm ready to receive your forgiveness, God. I'm ready to let go of my clenched hands that are holding tight to my hurt and my anger and my judgement and my criticism and my guilt. All that stuff I can't seem to let go of that I might be filled with your joy."

I've never seen the movie "Frozen" by the way. I've been saying "Let it go" and I understand that's the title of a song in the movie. Well, maybe that song is a whisper in your ear. That if you really want some joy you have to let it go.

Gracious and loving God, we lift up to you today this whole congregation. You know what's in our hearts. You know the places that we struggle and the guilt that's heavy in our shoulders. Our sense of just not being enough, our sense that somehow you're disappointed with us. You know the places that we are critical of others and the voices in our heads that criticize the way others choose to live. We pray that somehow, God, you'll speak into our hearts that we might receive your forgiveness and offer it to others so that we might know your joy. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.