

After submitting to an annual physical exam, a man was sitting in a room waiting for the doctor's initial report. After a few minutes the doctor came into the office with a some notes and a chart in his hand and said: *"There's no reason why you can't live a completely normal life as long as you don't try to enjoy it!"*

I often wonder if this is how some people view religion, or their own faith life. After all, we may look to the church for some assurance of salvation and eternal life, but we don't always experience much joy in the present. I say this because perhaps some of you listening to my sermon have been taught, or maybe you believe, that if we just tow the line, if we follow the Ten Commandments, if we give enough money to God's work through the ministry of our congregation, and perform the right spiritual exercises, then God will be pleased and **we might actually make** it to heaven's door.

And yet, to the people in our society who are already burdened down by failed relationships, financial stress, and broken dreams, this hardly sounds like the "Good News of Great Joy" we read about in the Gospels. Didn't Jesus say: *"I have come that your joy may be full?"* Why is it that as Christians, we don't **always** seem to be living with much joy in our hearts, or in our life together? To help us find an answer to this question, perhaps we should consider that there are many factors that **may** have sucked the joy out of our Christian faith.

For starters, by exploring history, consider the burden imposed by the Roman Catholic Church upon people during the Middle Ages. I have seen evidence of this during my trips to Europe both before after I graduated from Seminary. As I was studying about early Christendom I learned how popes and bishops ruled Europe with an Iron Fist, waging war on those who disagreed with them. Making countless demands on the average person—at a time when it was expected that everyone was a member of the church. Remember the indulgences that were sold by Pope Leo X to raise money for St. Peter's in Rome? People were

expected to literally buy their way out of purgatory. Martin Luther became a hero when he railed against that practice suggesting if a Pope had such authority he should do it for free!

Over the centuries, people have used religion of all shapes and forms to justify the oppression of others. During World War 2, for example, Hitler was able to whip up religious fervor among the people of Germany in his attempt to exterminate the Jews and other undesirables. Whenever we are tempted to say “This is God’s will” or “God is on our side” we are on a dangerous ground of adopting an attitude of superiority over other children of God. Where is the joy in that?

For some, religion can become abusive—placing countless demands on people. In a cult-like fashion, some religious groups demand such absolute loyalty that their members are asked to denounce their families. In some cases, they are expected to turn all of their income over to the church. Even in mainline denominations, unrealistic expectations are placed on others. Or if there are problems or conflicts, Christ’s brothers and sisters can be quick to accuse or blame each other. Where is the joy in that?

Religion can also be used as a weapon to attack and condemn those who are different from us. For example, I am saddened by culture wars that seek to divide people over issues of morality. I remember attending the ELCA National Churchwide Assembly in Indianapolis several years ago when voting members were debating church policy related to issues of sexuality. A fundamentalist Christian group from out of state had camped outside the convention center and young children were parading up and down the streets with signs that said “God hates gays.” I can remember being at the gathering with my dad, and after seeing their signs I turned to him and asked, “What kind of a God do they believe in?” Indeed. A God who hates or condemns certain people? Where is the joy in that?

In our second lesson today, Paul writes from prison to the believers in Phillipis: *“I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.”* In his letter Paul wishes his readers to experience the true joy of their faith.

And what sort of Good News do we possess, that can bring us, and others such joy? It is none other than the Gospel word that we are saved by grace through faith. God has acted first in Jesus Christ to save us from our sin, and from our brokenness. And the good news is that it is all a gift! There is nothing that we have done, or can do, to earn God’s love and favor. It is a gift, pure and simple. And if that doesn’t start off a wave of joy—like a wave going through a Baseball Park or Football stadium—I don’t know what will. Yet at the same time, such all-encompassing grace can be controversial as we see in Jesus’ parable today. It sometimes seems too good to believe.

I’m fairly certain that most of us are familiar with today’s story, which is all about hiring laborers to work in a field and the manner in which the owner goes about paying them. Those who have worked a full day are outraged, when they find out that those who have worked only a short time have received the exact same wage for their work. And we might even agree with them, that this seems very unfair. But if we do that, we are viewing the issue according to our own set of standards, not God’s. In fact this parable from Jesus turns our **World** of assumptions upside down.

Think about it for a moment! The owner of the field, in our story, claims the right to pay his workers not on the basis of their merits—how many hours they have worked during the day—but on the basis of his own wishes and desires. And apparently, he longs to be generous with what belongs to him. After all, those who started at the beginning of the day agreed on the wage they received. They were

not cheated in any way. In the end, our narrative is ultimately a parable about God's grace. God is the owner of the vineyard, who gives everyone the same reward: the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. Shouldn't this bring us all great joy?

Yet there are three complaints to be dealt with in this story. They come from those who have put in a long day's work. Perhaps these same thoughts might be echoed by those of us who have served faithfully in the church for many years, and may think our opinion counts more than anyone else, especially over those who are newcomers or are different from us. Here are the three possible grievances the longtime laborers may have had:

1. "They assumed they would receive more." Was it greed that led the workers to desire more than they had been promised?
2. "The owner of the field made the latecomers equal to those who had worked all day." The workers assumed a certain hierarchy based on time worked and they expected to be rewarded differently. They made a distinction between "us" and "them", considering themselves better than the latecomers.
3. "They complain that they have born the burden of the day and the heat." These workers do not see their invitation to work as a sign of grace, but as a burden to carry. Unlike those who came late they didn't have to worry about where their next paycheck was coming from, or how they would provide for their families or how they would live for that matter. Some may likewise see living the Christian life as hard work, rather than an invitation to experience true joy.

Someone once wrote the following prescription for unhappiness: It's almost like a top ten list.

1. Make sure little things bother you: don't just let them, make them!

2. Lose your perspective of things, and keep it lost. Don't put first things first.
3. Get yourself a good worry—one which you can't do anything about but fret and worry.
4. Be a perfectionist: condemn yourself and others for not achieving perfection.
5. Be right, always right, all the time. Be the only one who is right, and be rigid about your rightness.
6. Don't trust or believe people, or accept them at anything but their worst and their weakest. Be suspicious of ulterior motives.
7. Always compare yourself unfavorably to others, which is a guarantee of instant misery.
8. Take personally—with a chip on your shoulder—everything that happens to you that you don't like.
9. Don't give yourself wholeheartedly, or enthusiastically, to anyone or anything.
10. Make joy the aim of your life and always be disappointed, instead of bracing for life's barbs through a "take the bitter with the sweet" philosophy.

Use this prescription regularly and you'll be guaranteed unhappiness. Thankfully, St. Paul provides us with a outstanding set of instructions for living a joy-filled life in our second lesson: *"Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in ONE spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel."* Joy, according to the Apostle, comes from allowing Christ to live within us personally and claiming our oneness in Christ as a community of faith. Striving **together** for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of God's unmerited and unearned grace .

While a sorrow shared is half the sorrow, a joy shared is twice the joy. Think of a new Mother or Father and the joy of sharing their news with friends and family. Consider the patient who has been cured of a deadly disease, and the joy of letting everyone know their good news. Even more so, is the joy of sharing Jesus Christ with a world in pain. That is our mission as individual Christians and as a church together.

In the near future I hope and I pray that we will find great joy as we work together, side by side in order that we may discover how we can join God in his mission of sharing his love with the World. In the end, however it is all a matter of personal choice. According to the playwright, Neil Simon, "It's important to know that you can choose to feel good. Most people don't think they have that choice." Likewise, it is important to know that as individuals, and as a congregation, we can choose joy. We can choose to live together with joy in Jesus Christ. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.