Advent 2016: Joy

12/11/16

John 15:11

*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, and I will be speaking about Joy.

Over the last one hundred years or so there has come to be a differentiation made between joy and happiness. Happiness has come to mean the feelings of contentment and delight derived from worldly experiences and happenings. Joy has come to mean those feelings of contentment and satisfaction caused by an inner connection to gratitude, caring for and serving others.

We are told that happiness is most often temporary, fleeting, and based upon outer circumstances. Joy on the other hand is lasting and based upon inner circumstances and is an attitude of the heart.

As Christians, we are led to believe that happiness needs to take a back seat to joy; joy is the superior emotion and state of mind.

I have to confess that I have believed this to be the case as well. But it is not Biblical; it is a hierarchy that has developed recently. The Bible uses the words joy and happiness together and almost synonymously. In Ester 8:16 we are told: “…*it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor*.” Then in Jeremiah 31:13: *I will turn their mourning into joy, give them consolation, and [bring] happiness out of grief*.

Although we are told that Joy is one of the gifts of Spirit, happiness is in no way an inferior unspiritual emotion to be avoided or condemned. I have come to believe that although happiness may be based upon ‘happenings’ it is something that God intends for us to experience. It is the Joy of God that expresses through our faces; it is the external representation of our inner Joy.

Joy and Happiness are gifts of the Christ. It is God’s plan for us to be happy and prosperous, as well as joyous and abundant in all areas of our lives. Just as it is not a sin or spiritual misstep to be wealthy, it is not wrong to want to be happy. Monetary wealth is just part of God’s desire for us to have abundance. Happiness is part of God’s desire for us to be joyful; they are subsets of each other. There is more to Joy than just happiness; there is more to Abundance than just a bank statement.

But they are all important. The danger lies in our focus. If we focus exclusively on happiness, on what happens in our lives to bring us joy, then we are setting ourselves up for disappointment, grief, and unhappiness. We may even tip to the point where all we seek is pleasure, and this can become a very dark path indeed.

The Christ wants us to derive our joy from an inner connection with God. That is part of the reason Jesus came to this earth; that is why we celebrate the birth of the Christ … to experience the Divine Joy that is beyond the World.

It is important to be happy, because that is what God wants for us. But it is also important to be in a joyful state despite our earthly conditions. Through our focus, connection, and awareness of the inner Christ we can lose our possessions and still be in a state of Joy and inner bliss. We can experience all of life’s trials and still rejoice. As James says, “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds*…”

By concentrating upon the inner Christ we raise our awareness above that of the world. I like the reference to this as raising the vibrations of our thoughts. Since science tells us that everything vibrates, and many believe that Spirit vibrates more quickly than anything else, as we elevate our thoughts, quicken our thoughts, we move toward God.

So when we raise our thinking beyond the world we advance toward the Joy of God and allow the ups and downs, ins and outs of the world to pass below us. The natural events of the world have no effect upon our state of Joy when we are connected to the Christ. We may not always be happy, and not be showing that on our faces in an external manner, but we can remain ever poised in the Joy of God, with a smile in our heart, regardless of our conditions while walking the earth in these bodies.

That is what we are promised: that the joy of the Christ might be in us and our joy may be full, complete, to the brim. We are promised Joy, not happiness.

Happiness is expecting what is “out there” to fulfill something. So we look to people, opinions, attitudes, places, events, and things, to align with our expectations. We wish each other a “Happy Thanksgiving,” a “Merry Christmas”, a “Happy Hanukah”, or a “Happy Holidays”. And those wishes are dependent upon good things happening: good food, good family times, good fun.

But to wish someone a joyous Christmas or a joyous New Year is a little different. We are praying for a mindset, a state of the heart, and a higher awareness of who they are and how they fit in. Yes, we want them to be happy, for good things to happen, but we also want them to remain joyous in the inevitable times when they are not happy.

Mary and I came back from our daughter Rebecca and her husband Ryan’s wedding. It was a happy occasion. But more than that, more than seeing our children join together happily, we watched as they came together joyously. Yes, their faces were spilling over with the inner joy of happiness, but at the same time we could feel that beyond their obvious outer happiness they were content, fulfilled, and rejoicing in their union. They brought that joy to each other on this occasion. It was a happy celebration of joy.

The Christ offers us a path of joy, and we can choose it or reject it. Joy is trusting when we want to doubt, accepting what is offered when we want to refuse it. Joy is serving when we want to be served; to give when we want to take. Joy is daring to celebrate when we want to hide in fear.

The word enthusiasm is derived from the Greek meaning “God within”. When we are expressing joy and enthusiasm, we are expressing the God within us. Of the many names that were used to describe Jesus the Christ, one was Emmanuel, which means “God is with us”. This thought, by itself, will help us elevate our state of mind, heart, and thinking.

My prayer is that we choose Joy; that we accept the gifts of the Christ: the Hope, the Peace, and the Joy. I pray that we can understand that the Joy of the Lord is our strength, and acknowledge the idea expressed by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Joy is not a denial of the things of the world, but an affirmation: an affirmation that despite all the lessons and challenges that the world has to offer – Love wins.

Let us pray….