

Sermon August 14, 2022

Joy

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When Michael Blackwood first asked me to give a sermon we were standing in the Sanctuary and my first response was to look over my shoulder and see if he was talking to someone else. After confirming that he must have been talking to me I said, “let me think about it” After a few days I said sure that would be interesting, and we figured out a date.

After thinking about various topics, I decide that the I would focus on the value of church and the meaning of this community to me. The high value, of spending time each week in spiritual reflection and the inspiration that I draw from this community. There really is no place like the BUCC.

So, I sat down and started drafting a sermon and the words seemed to leap onto the page. I spend a couple of hours putting down some ideas and stopped for the day. Later that day I was playing golf with Peter Crouse, and he mentioned how hard it was to put together a sermon because “you wanted it to so sound good”. I got up first thing the next morning to review what I had written with plans to etch some more ideas onto the parchment..... Much to my chagrin what I had written was a total bust. It just didn’t work and was going to put everyone to sleep.

Over the next 24 hours I started to get a little depressed and worried about my ability to come up with a good sermon. So naturally I went to Google and searched the list of the best books on religion for some ideas that might resonate. The one book that kept coming up was – “The Book of Joy”. Given my state of mind and all that is going on in the World, I was sure a little JOY wouldn’t hurt me or this congregation.

The Book of JOY is written by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the His Holiness the Dalai Lama-, with Douglas Abrams. These Nobel Peace Prize winners are ‘two of the greatest spiritual leaders of our time. The Arch’s fight against the South African apartheid and the Dalai Lama’s life in exile after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, are two of the most incredible struggles our world has seen in the last 50 years.

This book is a summary of a weeklong discussion between Dalai Lama and Archbishop about the things they have learned in their lifetimes that helped them not only survive adversity but maintain grace and find JOY. They identified the beliefs, actions, and emotions that they follow to create a Joyful life. They profess the Pillars of Joy are qualities that we can develop and perfect that can lead to a more joyful life.

How does one face adversity and weave a path through the most egregious mistreatment of people and yet at the same time seek JOY in life? These two religious icons have made a great stab at this challenge as they look at intersections between Christianity and Buddhism.

The introduction to this book sums it up like this-

“The Archbishop has never claimed sainthood, and the Dalai Lama considers himself a simple monk. They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil, in the midst of which, they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, of joy that we can aspire to in our lives. Their desire for this book is not just to convey their wisdom but their humanity as well. Suffering is inevitable, they said, but how we respond to that suffering is our choice.”

What is Joy? I personally never had spent much time seeking joy. For me Joy is often derived from the ability to connect with others and be a part of something that is bigger than just myself. Joy is what you feel when you look at the face of your new born infant. Joy is bigger than just feeling good and different from ‘Happy’. It is that wonder and awe that you feel when you are overwhelmed and amazed

Today’s scripture was examples of a few of the Bible’s references to Joy. 1-The wisemen’s Joy of seeing and following the Star in the East. 2- Joy of the belief in the miracle of Jesus, 3- and the wonders of our world “For you shall go out in JOY...The hills will break forth in singing and all the trees of the field will clap their hands”. The Biblical references to Joy are more numerous than any other word I searched. Joyfulness is a common goal described in the bible, yet I had never thought that being a “good Christian” would result in Joy.

The Eight Pillars of Joy

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop identified Eight Pillars of Joy- qualities that we can develop to increase the Joy in our lives. Four are pillars come from the mind and four are pillars come from the heart. The pillars from the mind are qualities we must think our way through- they are: *Perspective, Humility, Humor, and Acceptance*. The pillars from the heart ones that we must feel in our sole: *Forgiveness, Gratitude, Compassion and Generosity*.

The four Pillars from the mind

1st Pillar from the mind: Perspective- looking for the good in every situation and ‘how the glass is half full not half empty’. Are we myopic in our perspective or are we looking at our situation from a broader point of view. The challenge is to abandon looking at life from a self-centered, self-interest perspective and instead look at everything from a broader perspective of the world. A classic story of the two paraplegic soldiers, with virtually identical IED injuries - 1st glad to be alive with a second chance to live life to the fullest, and the 2nd lying on a bed in a fetal position decrying his fate. Which soldier do you think is more likely to find JOY? Our prospective towards life is the final ultimate freedom and something we can

control. For me personally this first pillar can often make the quickest change in my outlook of a situation- almost instantaneous. I know I often get stuck in MY Prospective.

2nd Pillar from the mind: Humility- You are one of 7 billion people in this world- are you that special? The problem is that arrogance will separate you, not endear to other people. A lack of humility can confine you like a coffin. There are times when I think about this pillar and get an almost instantaneous release of my constraints associated with my arrogance. Yes, you have skills but so does everyone else and we are all in this together. The bible has many references to “God hating the prideful and lifting up the humble.”

3rd Pillar from the mind: Humor- Both the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop work hard to incorporate humor into their lives; yet we don't see much about humor in the bible. I think much of humor in the bible was lost in translation. Humor is often based language and cultural understandings. But humor, especially the ability to laugh at yourself always makes it easier to connect with others- we all have the same shortcomings, and we all are more than a little hilarious. Humor is a way to gain perspective on “our shared ridiculousness” and our common humanity. If you start looking for the humor in life you will find it and then you will stop asking ‘why me’, and you will be open to Joy.

4th Pillar from the mind: Acceptance- This is the place where change can begin. My reference is the serenity prayer: “GOD, GRANT ME THE SERENTIY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE, COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN, AND WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.” This is so easy to say but hard to do. But, it can lead us to ‘accept our life in all its pain, imperfection, and beauty’. Acceptance is the opposite of resignation and defeat. The book points out that the Archbishop did not accept the inevitability of apartheid but he did accept its reality. Only by accepting reality can we begin to start to work on change. So many of our distresses in life comes from our reacting to the people, places, things and circumstances in our lives, rather that accepting them.

Once you have your MIND wrapped around the first four foundational Pillars of JOY, you can work on those that come from the HEAR. Most of you will be very familiar with these pillars.

1st Pillar from the heart: Forgiveness- This is pillar everyone is familiar with, but one which many of us struggle with. When you hear of someone forgiving the murderer of their child it is easy to see how that might set them free, but it is hard/inconceivable to imagine. The Archbishop said that “Forgiveness is the only way to be free of the past.” Let just think about the Lord's Prayer – Forgive us our sins. Can you forgive yourself? And let us Forgive those who sinned against us.

Sometimes it can be hard to forgive family members, especially parents. Thirty years ago I took an 'experiential self-development course' that had a section on forgiving your parents for their shortcomings by remembering that they were "doing the best they could". For me that simple forgiveness was liberating.

2nd Pillar from the heart: Gratitude- Each day is a new opportunity to show gratitude for being alive and experiencing new things. We have so much in this country to be grateful for and yet how often are we thankful for a, hot shower, warm bed, and breakfast in the morning? Think of all the refugees or the victims of war and famine. Have you counted your blessings today. In fact, if you just take one thing from this sermon, get up tomorrow morning (and every morning this week) and take one minute to look outside and see the glory of a new day and be thankful for this wonderful world that we live in. For me this gives be a couple minutes of Joy to start of each day.

UC Davis Professor Robert Emmons has been studying gratitude for over a decade. He and his colleagues found that grateful people do not seem to ignore or deny the negative aspects of life; they simply choose to appreciate what is positive. We must all look for the POSITIVE.

3rd Pillar from the heart: Compassion- Compassion is a skill that needs to be cultivated. Concern for the other person is something that is very precious. When we focus on 'reducing someone else suffering our own suffering is reduced'. This was one of Jesus' greatest strengths- his compassion for others. Peter 3:8 "be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." I think compassion is one thing this congregation understands very well.

4th Pillar from the heart: Generosity - is something that usually only comes when all the other pillars are in place. It is a reoccurring theme in the Bible. Corinthians 9:6-8 *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* There are no restrictions on the kind of 'generosity', as we say time, treasure or talent. But, I think these icons also suggest that we have a GENEROUS SPRIT. Sow as many compliments and good thoughts of others as you can.

So what does this look like?

Can you take these pillars into your daily and feel more JOY? Can you connect better with people? Can you feel better about yourself?

Here is how I have tried to use these pillars over the last 6 weeks.

I use the pillars of the mind at different times than the pillars from the heart.

I call upon the Pillars of the Mind any time I have some minor frustration, annoyance or unsettling discussion:

Shortly after reading about the pillars of joy, Kim (my wife of 47 years) had a disagreement over some challenge to marital bliss. That night while I was walking my dog Fletcher, I spent several minutes explaining to Fletcher how wrong Kim was and how her perspective was mistaken; as usual Fletcher provided silent support as he sniffed his way down the street. Then I thought about the Book of Joy and how handicapped I was because of my myopic prospective and lack of humility in seeing her numerous points. It was then easy to laugh over my reaction to our discussion and move on with re-examining the errors of my ways and the point she had made in the discussion. In the last month I have encountered several frustrating situations that were resolved/handled by a quick review of the Pillars of Joy.

Now for the bigger issues I need to move on to the pillars from the heart.

For me the pillars of the heart are always in the background, and it is good to keep them in mind.

Forgiveness, for me is mainly looking at my own shortcomings and trying to move on to 'correct the things I can'.

Gratitude- I start every day looking out the window and thinking this is a Glorious day to be alive- 'this is the World that God has made' (I try to say this every morning-no matter what). I find that this has grown into a few minutes of joy at the start of the day and sets the tone for the rest of the day.

Compassion – I think about how lucky I have been in my life. My mantra to help with Compassion is simple ---There but for the Grace of God, go I.

Generosity – I try to be generous in thought and action. It does not cost anything to pay a compliment to someone. What can I give, Time, Treasure, Talent, or something else? Can I do so with JOY? I joined a Rotary Club over ten years ago to spend a little time every week thinking about service to others and how I can be generous.

I have looked at many of the trials and tribulations of today's world, from Roe v Wade, Gun control, the BIG Lie, the political divide, and tried to apply the various pillars. Usually, I can identify at least half of them that are directly applicable. While for many situations I am not mature enough/faithful enough, to find the Joy- but that does not mean I can't look. After reading this book I believe it is a fundamental objective in life, to look for and find JOY. We all will do better if we can be joyful. These pillars have helped me find JOY, and I hope they might help you also. Remember Psalm 118:24 *This is a day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen*