

2018 10 07 – The Root of Joy

Psalm 126
Joel 2:21-27

Forget your fear, my beloved land!

Rejoice and be glad,

For YHWH has done great things.

Here's the prophet Joel standing in front of a large assembly of Hebrew people. It has been a horrible year. In fact there have been several years of famine and hardship. The prophet, speaking for YHWH, for God, says,

I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.

It's not clear whether Joel's talking about flying insects or invading armies of men, but it doesn't really matter because either way the Hebrew people have suffered and suffered greatly. And here's this religious leader telling them to forget their fear and to rejoice, to rejoice for YHWH has done great things. I'm wondering how many of them are standing there wishing they had brought tomatoes or some other rotten vegetable to throw as a response.

When times are tough, it's hard to imagine that we have any reason to rejoice and be glad. When we are in pain, physical or emotional, it's hard to imagine that there is anything in our life worth our gratitude. When life, as we know it, seems to be coming to an end, it's hard to imagine that on the other side of this fear and

unknowing will be a time of peace and joy. And the last thing we need is some religious nut telling us to rejoice!

But it's Thanksgiving Sunday, so here I am and I'm glad that all the food is here at the front of the church with me because I'm standing here with a message of joy and gratitude. And I know in my heart and in my soul, that no matter what each of us in this sanctuary may be feeling right now, no matter what we have going on our lives, we all have reason to be grateful. And we all have the capacity to experience joy.

I'm grateful. I'm grateful for this beautiful space in which we gather. I'm grateful for all the volunteers who make each Sunday's service possible. Today I am especially grateful for those who have prepared the table at that front of the church and arranged it so beautifully. And most of all, I am grateful that you are here to share this blessed time with us. And even as I say those words I can feel the joy starting to permeate my body.

You see gratitude has a lot to do with joy. In fact Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, tells us:

The root of joy is gratefulness...

It is not joy that makes us grateful;

it is gratitude that makes us joyful.

“The root of joy is gratefulness.” So what is it that keeps us from experiencing gratitude and joy in our lives? Brené Brown, a well-known researcher and author, gave this example from her own life. She wrote,

I’ve always been prone to worry and anxiety, but after I became a mother, negotiating joy, gratitude, and scarcity felt like a full-time job. For years my fear of something terrible happening to my children actually prevented me from fully embracing joy and gratitude. Every time I came too close to softening into sheer joyfulness about my children and how much I love them, I’d picture something terrible happening; I’d picture losing everything in a flash. (The Gifts of Imperfection, page 81)

Dr. Brown goes on to explain that we live in a time filled with fear and anxiety. And one way that we think we can avoid even more pain is by not allowing ourselves to feel the gratitude and the joy that is a part of ordinary living. But we are wrong. She notes, “If we’re not practicing gratitude and allowing ourselves to know joy, we are missing out on the two things that will actually sustain us during the inevitable hard times.” If we can know true joy in everyday living then it will be possible for us to feel that joy, and know God’s love, even when suffering happens. (The Gifts of Imperfection, page 82)

In Psalm 126 we heard the Hebrew people remembering a time of great joy, a time when they were able to come home after years of exile in Babylon. They sing, “Our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with songs of joy.” They remember what it was like to experience pure joy, to feel gratitude for the great things that God has done. But now they find themselves unable to feel

those emotions. They sing to God, “Now set our captive hearts free, YHWH! Make them like streams in the driest desert!” The Hebrew people are no longer in exile and yet they feel as if their hearts are still imprisoned. Now, instead of the Babylonians, it is fear that is the gatekeeper. It is fear of losing what they have, of not having enough, of loving too much that keeps them from knowing joy. Like us, they need to recognize that God is still doing great things for them. They need to be present in each moment of their daily living and ready to practice gratitude for each gift that they receive.

So, like the prophet Joel, I am asking you to “forget your fear, to rejoice and be glad.” Today, as we celebrate the sacrament of communion, I invite you to take that time of quiet and inner contemplation to name for yourself all the blessings that you have received. Name the people you have loved, the places you have lived, the times for which you are grateful. Name the simple joys of your life, the things of beauty that you have seen, the harmonious sounds that you have heard, the glorious smells that you have enjoyed and the wonderful food that you have tasted. Immerse yourself in the endless bounty of God’s love and in the blessings of Jesus who came to this earth to teach us how to love and how to live. Allow yourselves to sink into a sea of gratitude, a river of love and a moment of joy.