

“Complete Joy”¹
Philippians 2:1-13 and John 15:1-17
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Making Room for Generosity – Sermon 4
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Not too long ago, a friend who is a Republican, immediately captured my imagination when he told me that his parents refused to support Ronald Reagan as President. “That’s odd,” I told him. “Reagan was very popular with most Republicans.” “Yes,” he told me, “but my parents were tithing Christians. And when Reagan’s tax returns were published they saw how stingy he was with his personal finances and they could no longer respect him.” Sure enough, I looked it up and, after claiming publicly that he was a tither, the Reagans’ 1980 tax return reported charitable contributions of \$3,085 on an adjusted gross income of \$228,000, barely cresting 1%. The year before they contributed \$4108 on \$516,000, less than 1%. By contrast President George W. Bush hovered around 10% during his entire presidency while Barack Obama contributed in the double digits percentagewise hitting nearly 23% of his adjusted gross income in 2012. To be fair, Obama’s contributions went way up during his Presidential years from more modest, even below average levels in years prior to his election, something he shares with most Presidents. Transparency about what they give seems to inspire greater giving.²

Maybe that’s why it’s easier to talk about the Presidential tithing than it is to talk about our own. The idea behind the 10% tithe is simple. Nothing that we own or have is ours to begin with. That’s why Christians talk about stewardship and not ownership. The land you walk on, the apartment or house you live in, the money that you earn. It’s not yours. We’re handling resources that belong to God. And out of the generosity of God’s heart, you have permission to use up to 90% of those resources for food and clothing and education and housing and whatever else. God just asks for your first and best gift, a target of 10%.

Peter Marshall, chaplain to the Senate many years ago, told the story of a person who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. “I have a problem,” he told Marshall, “I used to tithe regularly but now I am earning \$500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000. Marshall replied, I can see your problem. Let’s pray about it. “[Gracious God],” he prayed, “I pray that you would reduce this man’s salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe.”³

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, member of the Well preaching group, for the architecture and insights of this sermon series. Joe draws on *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* by Adam Hamilton.

² Perhaps the most generous President of recent years, George H.W. Bush, gave away 62% of his income in 1991. <http://www.taxwarriors.com/blog/analyzing-u.s.-presidents-charitable-contributions> and <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/20/us/reagan-says-he-contributes-10-of-his-income-to-needy.html>

³ The story is retold by Adam Hamilton in *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press), p. 84.

It's likely that most of us come from the opposite end of things. It's not the \$500,000 problem, but the five figure or low six figure challenge "If I just had a little more cushion," we tell ourselves, then I might be able to stretch a little more." This is true to a point and to my own experience. But so it the fact that generosity is a kind of priority that only gets deepened by intentionality and practice. Wherever you find yourself in relationship to the 10%, we're called to prioritize God with our first and best gifts instead of giving God the leftovers. We're called to recognize God's generosity and respond to it with our own.

I was going to argue today that this is, in fact, what brings us true joy. Thankfulness leads to contentment. And contentment with what we have and who we are leads to simplicity – the shedding of the need for more stuff. And simplicity makes room for greater generosity. And generosity leads to our greatest joy. This is, in fact, what I have borne witness to as your pastor. Whether we are talking about the time that you give to tutor a child or serve in leadership or greet at the front door, or the money that you give to the ministry and mission of our church. It's rare that I meet anyone who is looking to be recognized for their generosity. It's more often the opposite: "I'm so pleased to be able to share my time serving in the church." "I'm the one who is blessed to shared this financial gift for the good of our community." Generosity certainly leads to joy.

But the texts for today speak less about our joy and more about *God's* joy. Paul calls the Philippians to have the same mind as Christ Jesus, who gave himself, emptied himself, humbled himself, and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, proclaiming, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work," for what? "For *God's* good pleasure."

Our purpose, according to Paul, is not our joy, but *God's* joy; "*God's* good pleasure." When we are reconciled with one another, when we are not consumed by ambition or achievement at the expense of others, when we offer ourselves service to God's mission out of love for God's world, we bring joy to God. In doing that, the Philippians do make Paul's joy complete, but that's not the goal. The goal is seek God's good pleasure - God's joy.

And similarly, John's Gospel makes it clear that when we love as Christ loves us, giving ourselves completely and as generously as Christ gave himself for us we experience the actual indwelling of God. We experience the actual joy of God within us. That actual joy is of a God who seems to delight in giving us more than we need not because we deserve it, but because God loves us. That, John's Gospel says, is joy that is complete.

Today is Veterans' Day but it's also the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, the end of World War I. Veterans Day has become a day to honor those who serve or have served in the military. But the original Armistice Day honored their service by proclaiming our communal responsibility to strive for peace. The *end* of the war is what was celebrated as "the Great Deliverance." The war itself was the "great agony." "The popular memory of World War One," one scholar notes, "is of 'mud, blood, trenches and incompetent generals.'"⁴ Perhaps because of this, after the war

⁴ Professor Chris Kempshall quoted in "World War One: The boozy parties of Armistice Day," by Justin Parkinson of BBC News, November 8, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45641166>

surviving soldiers and their families threw sometimes elaborate and raucous parties. They were so grateful to be alive. Perhaps that's the greatest kind of joy that there is.

But Jesus would scoff at the idea that it takes a war to know that kind of gratitude and its resulting joy. It simply takes allowing God to abide in us. To see what brings God joy and to allow God to work within us so that we can know that joy, too.

My friend and colleague, Joe Clifford, who's work has shaped much of this sermon series, brought to my memory the film "Chariots of Fire" which is one of the first films I remember from my childhood. It came out in 1981 winning Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Costume Design, Best Score. (Daa.dadadadada) It tells the story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. Harold Abrahams was of Jewish descent, and strived to be a true Englishman, though the anti-Semitism of his day obstructed his goal. Eric Liddell was a Scot, born in China to Christian missionaries. While he felt a call to follow in his parents' footsteps, he also loved running, and wanted to pursue the chance to compete in the Olympics.

This irked his sister, Jennie, who saw running as a distraction from working for God. Eric ultimately convinced her by telling her he felt called to return to China to answer his calling to be a missionary, but that he had to compete in the Olympics before he could go. "I believe God made me for a purpose," he explained to her, "but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."⁵

Liddell made the Olympic team, but in a tragic irony, the qualifying race for his best event, the 100m sprint, fell on a Sunday. He decided he could not compete without violating his Christian understanding Sabbath observance. Ultimately another runner offers him his place in the 400m event—not Liddell's strength because he's a pure sprinter. He takes the offer, but no one expects him to win.

The finale of the film is that final 400. Liddell takes the lead in the race with everyone expects him to fade. As they make the turn for the finish line, the scene turns slo-mo and you hear the whisper of his comment to his sister: "God made me for a purpose...but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure." (Music—duuuu, danana da da....) He throws his head back in a moment of complete joy; not the joy that comes from winning a race, but the joy that flows forth when we feel God's pleasure, God's joy. That's what the life of faith is all about.⁶

It's our youth and adults out on the Chesapeake Bay yesterday learning how to care for waters that never belonged to any of us, learning and teach what is required from us to restore its health persistently and consistently over time. It's the choir lifting up their voices in prayers that sustain us even as they appeal to God. It's standing out in the rain this week patiently listening to voters share their deepest fears, reknitting the social fabric one conversation at a time. It was Rosalyn

⁵ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/trivia?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu

⁶ Liddell did fulfill his calling to become a missionary to China. Ultimately, it cost him his life. He was captured by the Japanese after they invaded China in World War II. He died in an internment camp February 21, 1945, weeks before the camp was liberated. He was only 43 years old.

Johnson, a member of the Eastern Cherokee tribe, an American Indian who greeted our Presbytery yesterday in Baltimore County reminding us that long before European settlers came, native peoples lived here. "I am honored," she said, "to be recognized at a time when our racial identities are such a source of division. God sent Jesus to reconcile us to one another. And some of that work has taken place today." God's pleasure. God's joy.

What brings God joy? When we live into our calling. God made each of us, and God made us for a purpose. What is your purpose? For what did God make you? What are your gifts? How do you put them to work in our world? Whatever your calling, know that it is part of a greater endeavor, for we share a common calling. What is it? That we love one another, as Christ has loved us, offering all we have in love for the world, giving the life of God to each other, Jesus in us and us in Jesus. In answering this call, we discover God's joy is in us, and our joy is complete. May it be so. Amen.