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Joy in 2021?

John 15

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2021 was going to be the year. It was going to be the year that everything came back, and we rebounded into the way things used to be. It was going to be great!

But even if you find yourself feeling pretty great about how 2021 has been, the truth is that our whole world is reeling from the last two years. So what do we do, then, when the church calendar says we are supposed to focus on joy this week?

First, even if you are not the one hurting right now, you know someone who is. And part of our job as Christians is to come alongside people, and be present with them. This means understanding these things.

Second, I noticed something for the first time as I prepared for this: Joy in scripture is often linked to incredible difficulty. John 15, where our scripture came from today, also mentions being excommunicated, oppressed, and hated. Acts describes physical beatings and floggings with joy. Longing and loneliness are accompanied by joyful writing in many of Paul's letters. How could they accomplish that?

A clinical psychologist named Forrest Talley wrote this:

“Whereas happiness can be easily manufactured, joy comes through setting up the right conditions for it to suddenly appear. Happiness can be brought about by a good cup of coffee in the morning or a funny movie. Joy, on the other hand, is more difficult to cultivate.” This is very simple, but deeply profound to me. Happiness is spontaneous. Joy takes effort, will, intention, and work to cultivate. This makes joy more lasting.

Many people today will tell you how to have joy. Oprah, self-help books, scientific journals. . . they are packed with ideas, suggestions, and benefits of Joy.

Here is what they say:

Look for meaning.

Think small picture.

Remember what you do have. Not what you don't have.

Be present.

Confront your past.

Help others.

Reconnect with Nature.

Make opportunities to laugh.

Seek out positive people.

These are all pretty good suggestions, and if you do them, then I think that you will feel pretty good. But, as I read John 15, they all miss the point. They are like archery shots that hit the target but miss the bullseye. They come close, but they are missing the crucial piece, the lynch pin of the whole thing.

Most of the advice on joy and contentment out there begin with us. Look inside yourself, and find the will and the motivation to make yourself better. Do these things, and you will feel good about yourself. Figure out what makes you happy, and pursue those things. Close.

John 15, I think begins in a different place, and this makes all the difference.

First, Jesus tells us that he is the vine, and we are branches. What?

Our identity as humans has become quite the issue in recent years. We have attempted to define ourselves in hundreds of different ways. But here is the bedrock of human identity. We are only truly human beings in relationship to, or in the perspective of God.

It is not our sexuality, nationality, politicality, or relationality. It is not who you know, what you know, or how you know it. It is not your relationship status, your friends list, or your passionate hobby. It is not what you've read, what you've bought, or where you've travelled.

You, my friends, are branches. And branches only make sense if there are trees in the world. And we, and I can't stress this enough, we are not the trees. We are branches. Offshoots. Wholly dependent on the tree for life and limb. See what I did there?

Humanity are creatures, which means we are created. We do not have the power, control, or wisdom to nurture ourselves, grow fruit, or even to breathe without a connection to the vine.

When we really come to grips with this fact, when we stop trying and striving to be something that we are not, to control things we can't and impress people with our competence, there is a contentment that comes, a joy, in knowing that we are part of God's family. There is joy to be had, because our hope is fundamentally not in the ingenuity of human beings, in science or arts or economics. Our connection to the vine is everything. And it cannot be broken. Recall the words of Paul in Romans 8:38-39:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is security, and this means we have hope. That builds a foundation for joy.

Second, remain in him.

Life is packed full of details. A million thoughts, voices, ideas, and demands fill our minds, and they crowd out our joy. Scripture is absolutely clear about one thing: Life is not found anywhere

else except in God. The problem is, we are so often drowning in the details of life that we cannot see God except for through our problems and desperation. We need to consciously clear our minds, so that God takes front and center stage, and everything else is seen through that perspective.

Pastor Sundar Krishnan talks about the release of Peter and Silas from a prison, and the believers gather together to celebrate their release. In their prayer, they worship God as creator, as revealer, as actor and as sovereign. They clear their minds of imprisonment, persecution, hunger, and deprivation. Instead, they exalt God to his rightful place, reminding themselves of exactly who it is that they follow as Lord.

Only then are they encouraged enough to go out and boldly change the world around them.

This is what worship does.

Have you ever wondered why we worship God? Is God a narcissist that needs to be adored? Or does our worship somehow make God greater, more powerful, or better? Maybe our worship makes him take notice of us, and become favourable to our needs and desires.

Nope, nope, and nope. All of those ideas have their roots in pagan ideas of who God is.

God is unmanipulatable, unattainable, and unchangeable. He is forever complete and holy, enthroned over the universe, entirely perfect. Our worship adds nothing to him.

But it adds everything to us. This is the mystery of Christmas, the root of our hope, and the foundation of our joy – God, in his untouchable majesty and unattainable holiness reaches out and draws his creation into him, embracing his creatures in a touchable, approachable, and loving way.

Our recognition of who God is, and who we are before him, places God front and center in our vision. Once God has been put in his proper place in our vision, all other things take their appropriate perspective before him. We no longer see God through the filter of the world, but we see the world in perspective of God. When we gather together as the church, when we find a quiet space in our day to deliberately fill our eyes with God, and we worship, we gain perspective, we stand again on solid ground, and remember our connectedness to God through Jesus. There is joy in the recognition that we know the end of the story, and it involves the righting of every wrong, and the provision of every need, by a heavenly God who defines himself by his love.

Third, bear fruit.

Here is one of the fundamental truths that Christians believe in, and is firmly rooted in scripture. The primary role of Christians towards God is to exist for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:11-12). But our role in the rest of creation is that of a servant. For example, read what Jesus has to say about achievements that are worth pursuing in Mark 10:42-45:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For

even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That is pretty strong language, but here is the thing. Just as worship puts our lives in context with God, so serving others helps to give us perspective on our lives in relationship with others. Intentionally helping out, whether it is a simple word of encouragement or thanks, or a multimillion-dollar gift, takes our concentration off of what we lack, and causes us to focus instead on how we can improve someone else’s life. And that feels amazing!

I have a friend that I recently met at McDonald’s for coffee. We both went to the kiosk to order electronically. During the payment process, we were both prompted to round up our total as a donation to Ronald McDonald house. I declined. My friend accepted. And that contrast has been living in my head rent free ever since.

While I was focused on what I couldn’t (or, in all honesty, wouldn’t) give or do, my friend had the benefit of being focused on what he could do. Even that shift in thinking from negativity to positivity is profound. What do you suppose will be my response the next time I’m in McDonalds?

And the result? Jesus says that he has given us these instructions so that our joy may be complete.

We change our orientation away from ourselves, away from our lack, and away from our own happiness. We begin the work of setting the stage for true joy, which is a life that is oriented towards our creator, our saviour, our only hope and our life.

Sundar Krishnan says this about prayer, and I believe it is the same about joy. “Circumstances around you might never change, but you will be unrecognizably changed.”

I believe that if we deliberately cultivate joy in this manner, if we do the hard work of recognizing who God is, remain in him through worship that keeps him as our primary focus, and serve others in love, then, something miraculous happens. Our perspective clears, and we see things clearly. Even if circumstances around us fall apart, we will find ourselves in the same place as those who have gone before us – a place of joy.

This, friends, is the secret to joy in 2021, and beyond.

Here are some ways to find joy this Christmas.

To remember your connection to the true Vine, intentionally carve out silence and solitude to remember who God is and who you are.

You are the child of God, created in his image, and the beneficiary of his promise.

Just let Ephesians 1 roll around in your head for a while. Soak it in:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his

glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

In order to worship, make a joy list. In the words of the hymn:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

Psalm 116 says,

Return to your rest, my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.

The way to crack a funk is to remind yourself repeatedly and intentionally of the places in your life that God has demonstrated his care for you, those places of life and vitality when you've experienced great joy.

Good friends.

That favourite place.

A favourite meal.

A favourite experience.

Make your list, and then worship God, the giver of every good gift.

In order to bear fruit, cultivate a habit of generous serving.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

A kind word.

A gift.

An hour of time.

A cup of coffee.

Shovel someone's walk.

Listen.

Here's the final thought. We know that happiness is fleeting, and random, while joy takes work to cultivate and prepare for. If we are diligent, and we do the work of cultivation, circumstances around us might never change, but we will be unrecognizably changed.

Jesus said these things so that our joy might be complete. Father, let it be so for us this Christmas season.