

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
Rediscovering Jesus: Joy Sharer  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Exodus 17:17; John 7:37-39

It was pure joy. There is no other way to describe it. Only moments before, thousands of people had been holding their collective breath, waiting to see what was going to happen. Then the ball leapt off the bat soaring toward deep right field. Slowly it began to arke toward the foul line. The right fielder was moving at what seemed like light speed in the same direction. Then as the ball neared the ground the fielder stretched out his glove as far as was humanly possible, and the ball fell into it. In that moment, dozens, hundreds, thousands, and perhaps more than a million people leapt from their seats and experienced a moment of pure joy. The Houston Astros had won their first “non-cheating” World Series. The players leaped into one another’s’ arms. They surrounded their manager, Dusty Baker, and celebrated his first ever World Series. Justin Verlander could finally let loose; the crowd went wild. Two days later, schools let out, businesses allowed their employees time away and Houston celebrated the victory with an ecstatic, joy filled, parade. It is a moment we in Detroit can only dream about. Let me ask though, how many of you have ever had one of those moments, one of those moments of absolute joy, not necessarily about sports, but at any time in life, a moment of pure joy? How many of you would like more of them? If you do, then you have come to the right place because joy is what our Jesus story is about this morning.

I realize that nowhere in John’s words that we read this morning is the word, joy. Even so, I would argue that joy is the focus because of context. How many of you learned about context clues in school? We learned how to use them to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words. The same theory often applies to Biblical texts. If we take them out of context, we often miss their central meaning. That is true of this morning’s story because the context is that Jesus is speaking during Judaism’s most joy-filled celebration, the Festival of Booths. The Festival of Booths was Judaism’s Mardi Gras. People would travel to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire and celebrate. There would be parades, ceremonies, and elaborate rituals. All of these would be done in a festive, joyous manner. The reason for the joy is that the people were celebrating two things. First, they were celebrating the harvest. The reason it is called the Festival of Booths is that people would build booths out in the fields in which to stay while they harvested. But the booths were not simply intended to be convenient places to stay, they were to remind the people of those who journeyed through the wilderness on their way to the Land of Promise and God’s faithful provision along the way.

Second, they were to remember God’s gift of water from the rock, the story about which we read this morning. This story was the basis for one of the greatest and most joyous celebrations of the festival. Priests would come down from the Temple carrying ritual water jugs, walk out of the Water Gate in the wall of Jerusalem, and go to the pool of Siloam. There they would fill the pitchers with water and return to the Temple, and then pour the water around the altar, in full view of the people. The priests would not travel alone on this ritual journey. They would be accompanied by thousands of people singing, dancing, waving palm branches, and being lifted to a state of almost rapturous joy. And I believe it was in that moment, sometime during that joy filled parade that Jesus spoke these words, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” In other words, what Jesus was saying was, if you find joy in this ritual, you haven’t seen or experienced anything yet. Come to me and find true joy. Come to me and find absolute joy. Come drink it in because I am the one, the Word, who brought not only life, but joy.

Joy is intended to be one of the central aspects of our faith. The word is used almost two hundred times in the scriptures. And the image of joy is to be something akin to the joy Astros' fans felt and the people at the Festival of Booths felt. It is supposed to lift us out of the funks in which we may find ourselves and into a fuller sense of being alive. The questions this raises then might be, where do we find this joy? Where can we go or what can we do to experience it? The answer can be found in this morning's story. It begins with Jesus giving us joy through the Spirit. This is what Jesus meant when he said that water would flow from the hearts of his disciples, meaning joy would be present in us just waiting to pour out. The discovery of joy continues in the growth of gratitude, gratitude toward God. I say this because the people at the Festival of Booths should not have been grateful or joyous. They lived in an oppressive economic and political system. They were regularly singled out for persecution. Their lives were economically and physically tenuous. Yet they found gratitude and joy. They found it by remembering all that God had done for their ancestors in the wilderness, all that God was doing for them in the harvest, and all that they believed God would do for them in the future. They were grateful for past, present, and future. And this gratitude showed itself in joy.

This my friends is where we can find joy as well. We can find joy in the growth of our gratitude. There is a problem with this concept though because we live in a society of ingratitude, because we have become a society of dissatisfaction. What I mean by this is that rather than being a society of gratitude for what we have been, are being, and will be given, we have become a society that is constantly dissatisfied with what we have had, have, and probably will have. My best example of this is a person who called 911 this past week because the pork they had been served at a restaurant was too pink. It didn't matter that they had someone waiting on them, cooking for them, and cleaning up after them, they were dissatisfied and expected the police to fix it. And though this is an extreme example many of us have experienced dissatisfaction. We buy something, contract for something, order something and it doesn't meet our expectations and we become dissatisfied, and it is this constant dissatisfaction that robs us of our joy even when we have so much to be grateful for. We have clean water, warm or cold water, food in our pantries, a roof over our heads, the freedom to gather for worship, the freedom to vote without fear, the ability to speak our minds, and above all, a God who loves us. We have a God who become one of us to allow us to slake our thirst for joy in God's infinite love, mercy, and grace.

What I want to do this week is to challenge all of us, me included, to grow our gratitude. The way I want to do that is to have each of us find three things for which we should be grateful...just three. Then, each morning offer God a prayer of thanksgiving for those three things, and then remember them throughout the day with gratitude. Then allow some joy to begin to build up so that as Jesus quotes the scripture, "Out the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living waters." Or in other words, out of our hearts will flow rivers of joy in which the world can bathe.