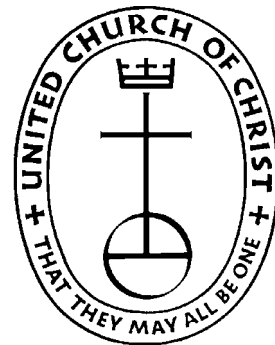


Sing Joy to the World

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
December 14, 2008



This sermon describes joy – not mere happiness which we may pursue, but the deep joy that captures our spirits, sometimes in situations where we would least expect it. We can't will ourselves to be joyful, but we can open the door for it to come in.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
December 14, 2008 (#1347)
Reading: Psalms (selections)

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

Sing Joy to the World

The season of Advent anticipates a joyful celebration of the birth of a Galilean peasant sage in whom God's love came to life. But what does it mean to be joyful? Is joy the same as happiness? Can we will ourselves to be joyful?

Well, whatever joy is, it has played a critical role in our faith heritage. Listen to some sentences from the great hymns of ancient Israel, the Psalms:

- *Acclaim our God with **joy**, all the earth. Serve our God with gladness; enter with a **joyful** song (100:1-2).*
- *You show me the path of life, O God. Your presence fills me with **joy**; and by your side I find enduring pleasure (16:11).*
- *God's anger is fleeting but God's favor endures forever. There may be tears during the night, but **joy** comes in the morning (30:5).*
- *Our mouths were filled with laughter; our tongues with sounds of **joy** (126:2).*

Joy was equally important in early Christianity. In the Christmas stories an angel greeted the shepherds:

- *You have nothing to fear. I come to proclaim good news to you – news of great **joy** to be shared by all people (Luke 2:10).*

Of the magi it was said:

- *When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with **joy** (Matthew 2:10).*

What is this joy so central to our faith? Well, perhaps by looking at some of my own joyful experiences I can find some common characteristics.

In 1987, Kay and I got married. A second marriage for both of us, our three daughters were in the wedding and our former Conference Minister Dan Romero was my best man. The wedding day itself was an occasion of tremendous joy for me, a joy that has continued virtually unabated all the years since. The wedding was a time of

profound happiness, but more than just a singularly happy moment; on a deeper level it seemed right, good, lasting. So joy is more than just happiness.

Another pivotal moment of joy for me was when our oldest daughter Kristina invited Kay and me to be present at our granddaughter Mikal's birth. How can I describe the joy of watching the miracle of my granddaughter come into the world and the contented joy on Kristina's face as she held her child for the first time?

Earlier this year, Emily, our second daughter, had her first child, and we now have both the joy of watching Charlotte grow and change and of proudly watching Emily become such a fine mother.

Those joyful occasions have clearly been in happy settings. But I also have felt joy at sad times and in times of crisis and challenge. I've spoken before about my attempted suicide when I was in graduate school. As I passed out, I assumed I wouldn't awaken. But I did, in a hospital. For a while, I was in a kind of emotional limbo. Then my parents called with love and affirmation, not judgment. And the Dean of Students from Harvard's Divinity School arrived at my bedside. Harvard is not exactly an institution known for warmth and caring, but from him I felt only acceptance and concern for my well-being. With his visit, I suddenly felt joyful; I was glad to be alive. This was not a happy time in my life, but it was nevertheless a time touched by joy.

I officiated at the funerals for both my parents. Those were difficult, sad occasions, but also there was the joy of a close extended family providing support.

Joy comes in many ways. I remember my joy a couple of years ago when we ran a temporary shelter downstairs and on Christmas Eve 100 homeless folks came up and sat in the balcony for our late night service. When I recognized our guests during the time of welcome, the whole congregation spontaneously stood and applauded. I felt such joy.

Amidst the pain of the passage of Proposition 8, there was the joy of seeing this congregation stand and sing together "We Shall Overcome."

Joy can also be found in regular ordinary moments, for me – greeting people after the service, teaching a confirmation class, being part of an interfaith event.

So from those experiences, can I define joy? Not easily, so I will simply list eight brief observations, hoping to stimulate each of you to reflect on joy in your lives.

First, as I've already said, **joy is not the same as happiness**. It goes deeper. Thus, we must be wary lest we get seduced into thinking our pursuit of pleasure, our thirst

for success and material prosperity are pathways to joy. Sometimes those who seem most successful lead lives profoundly devoid of joy.

A second observation: **joy is something that happens to us; it captures our spirits.** It comes upon us in unexpected ways. Theologian C. S. Lewis says joy often comes as a surprise. I am not sure you can decide to pursue joy. Lewis says such a pursuit ends up frustrating and fruitless because joy is elusive. You simply have to be receptive to its presence.

Poet William Butler Yeats wrote:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man, in a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table top.
While on the shop and street I gazed,
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great a happiness,
That I was blessed and I could bless.*

Yeats was speaking of a joy that often comes unbidden and unplanned for. It cannot be commanded or coerced into existence.

When a person is depressed, a friend may say, “You have no right to be depressed; look at all that for which you can be grateful. Let’s make a list of your blessings and then you ‘should’ feel joyful.” But joy doesn’t work that way. You can’t command it.

Peter Gomes, minister to the Memorial Church at Harvard, wrote, “Joy is elusive; it cannot be summoned forth like an actor’s tears. Joy is a response and not an initiation.”

My third observation: **Joy is often a matter of discovery.** Walter Burghardt, a Jesuit priest, said, “To be a Christian is to be forever discovering. As we grow older, it is increasingly easy to be bored and to bore, to be blasé, worldly-wise, sophisticated – meaning we have lost the power to wonder, to be surprised, delighted and amazed.”

I think the pursuit of wonder, newness and freshness often opens the doors of joy for us.

Writer M. J. Ryan says, “Children are such exuberant, joy-filled creatures, eager to embrace life in all its mystery and majesty. Everything is new, exciting, a gift – a bubble, a snowflake, a mud puddle. But something in the process of growing up often takes the juice out of us. We become encrusted, hard, jaded. We lose our joy, our passionate embrace of life.” You see, to be joyful is to be open to discovering things anew.

The next observation: **To experience joy we must learn to live in the present moment.** That’s a huge struggle for me. I resonate with Episcopal priest David Anderson’s words: “I find myself planning and working for the future, for payoffs and rewards in a month or a year, for which I am willing to pay with happiness now. Only to find of course, that there is always another month, another year to wait. True, the future must be planned for, and there are surely rewards tomorrow for prudent action today. But somehow, I must discover how to live a life of happiness today. Not someday when things quiet down and there’s enough in the bank and I’ve gotten beyond these problems – but today.”

M. J. Ryan wrote poignantly about her adopted child: “Last night I watched Ana, whom we recently adopted from China, lie on the bed in an ecstatic trance of bottle sucking. Her eyes closed, her mouth pursed, her exquisitely long fingers curled around the plastic bottle, she gave herself over to the experience...

“She wasn’t obsessing on past wounds, although she had a right to. Neglected for over a year, when we got her she was covered with burns from lying in her own urine. Nor was she worrying about where future bottles might come from, although she had a right to do that also. Abandoned on a cold street until someone heard her newborn cries, she had been fed only watered down milk and seemed to be starving the first few weeks we fed her...

“But she was so focused on appreciating the warm milk as it went down her throat that everything else, past and future, disappeared. As I looked at her, I realized that this total absorption in the present moment is available to us all when we let gratitude wash over us.”

The fifth observation: **joy cannot be domesticated.** Again from Peter Gomes, “Joy is not a natural substance to be mined or minted, and it doesn’t belong to us as we imagine that property or ideas belong to us.”

I think joy often comes in life’s elusive moments or in the struggle for justice and peace, when suddenly we feel fully, if only for an instant, enraptured with wonder.

Peter Gomes wrote of listening to the Boston Symphony and singer Jessye Norman. He said, "It was an extraordinary performance, and as the last note ended, there was in that vast hall an incredible silence, and then the place erupted into thunderous applause. It came to me," he said, "that the silence was not merely the absence of sound but rather an expectant, pregnant silence, nearly overpowering in its effect."

Here, after a particularly powerful solo or anthem, there is sometimes that same stillness as we find ourselves in wonder, filled with joy.

Classical dance is one of my passions. Perhaps the greatest night of ballet for me came in 1990 as American troops prepared to attack Iraq. Chicago's Joffrey ballet, one of my favorites, was at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The first piece of their repertory was magnificent, made infinitely better when Gerald D'Arpino, the company's artistic director, came and sat right next to Kay and me, applauding with enthusiasm, shouting "bravo," enthralled with his company's performance.

But then D'Arpino changed the repertory for the evening, adding the anti-war ballet *The Green Door*. At the end of the performance of that work, there was that same pregnant silence Gomes felt at his concert. The dancing had been wonderful, the choreography magnificent, the ballet technically superb in all ways. But the silence was a tribute to the courage it took to stage that ballet at that moment in American life.

The sixth observation: **joy occurs in all contexts**. Robert Schuller once said he never mentioned Martin Luther King or civil rights at the Crystal Cathedral because he only wanted people to think positive happy thoughts. For me, genuine joy arises from real life. Mexican liberation theologian Jorge Lara-Braud felt a strange sense of joy after the assassination of El Salvador's famous archbishop, Oscar Romero. Catholic theologian Doris Donnelly, trying to explain that joy, said: "Joy is not jollity. It is more like an anchor that gives us the stability we need to endure upsets, struggles and delights with an inner peace that no storm can shake."

Listen to terminally-ill Bradford Smith, who found joy even in the challenge of his illness: "We usually refuse to face death until something forces us to. Then strangely, the response is not fear any longer, but acceptance, even contentment. You can relax, take time to drink in all that is beautiful, listen to music, read the books you have longed to go back to, let nature sink in through every pore, spend more time with those you love, and ease the string to your bow so that living loses its tenseness but not its joy."

The seventh observation: **joy and gratitude are intertwined.** Whenever we are appreciative, we are filled with a sense of well-being which can become something joyful.

Unitarian minister Forrest Church is younger than I am, and he is near death from cancer. In a new book about his pending death he said, "To eliminate all pain from our lives may work for a brief time, but we cannot wish away all that is wrong with us without including all that is right." He said, "Each day that I am sick, I pray for the sun to come up, for people to love me, for manageable tasks that I can still accomplish, and for a little extra courage. I back away from the dark window pane of my health to see the whole window. Then light dances again in my daughter Nina's eyes. I laugh once more at my little foibles. My son, Frank, and I celebrate the Mets' acquisition of a new pitcher. I call friends on the phone and talk for an hour about everything under the sun."

You see, as sick as he is Church's joy arises from his gratitude for the life experiences he can still have.

The last observation: **Joy is often a communal experience** arising from relationships and community. A sentence in Deuteronomy celebrates the feast of Succoth:

This is a feast for you – be joyful with your spouse, your daughters and sons, your indentured workers, and even with the foreigners that live among you, and the orphans, the widows and widowers" (16:14).

Rabbi Israel Miller says of that passage, "You cannot truly be happy unless you share God's bounty and share yourself with others. It is in community that joy is to be found, lived and shared."

On Christmas Eve, if you sit alone and light a candle and perhaps quietly sing "Silent Night," you might feel a sense of warmth, of calm, of joy. But if you do the same thing, surrounded by people who mean a lot to you, I would guess that warmth, calm and joy would be even greater. And if you come to our late Christmas Eve Service, and find yourself surrounded by 500 lighted candles and a whole congregation quietly singing "Silent Night," the joy will undoubtedly be even more profound.

The joy we symbolize with today's third Advent candle transcends a simple definition. But hopefully those eight observations will enable us to sense the importance of joy on the Advent journey each of us is making toward that Bethlehem manger. Again those words from Luke's Christmas story: *I come to proclaim good news to you – news of great joy to be shared by all.*