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People of Joy

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If we scanned the whole Bible looking for one word that could define what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to be a Christian, what word do you imagine we'd find? Besides the words *Jesus* and *God*, one of the most frequently occurring words in both the Old and New Testaments is the word *joy* and its practice, *rejoice*.

Often, when someone finds out I am a priest, they can't wait to start a conversation by criticizing me and my faith by stating their opinion that God is angry and delights in punishing people for sins. After a little bit of questioning, they usually reveal they have not read the Bible, and while there are of stories of God getting angry, there are plenty more Bible stories about people receiving God's love and returning that love with joy, by rejoicing that God's love frees them from oppression. The word *joy* or *rejoice* appears hundreds of more times than the words *anger* or *sin* or *punishment*. Even more than the words *fear* or *faith*. Depending on the translation you use, the word *joy* is mentioned over 430 times in the Bible.

So, one could argue the mark of a follower of Jesus, the telling characteristic of a Christian, is joy. One story that supports this is the account the author of Luke's Gospel gives in our Gospel reading today, but we can miss the joy if we look only at the miracle or notice how Jesus shut down his critics. There is more to this story than healing and Jesus throwing down authoritative shade at the religious leaders. There is what is at the heart of the sabbath and the reason for rejoicing: liberation. Not liberation to do whatever a person wants. Liberation in its theological sense: freedom from oppression, freedom to choose God's will over our own or that of someone in power over us.

When Jesus stopped his lecture in the synagogue that sabbath day, because he noticed a woman, called her, blessed her, touched her, he gave her more than the ability to stand up, he gave her respect, and dignity. His healing transformed her life, and she responded by praising God.

This is what rejoicing is: praising God. Sometimes we can forget that. Sometimes we mistake rejoicing for being happy when something goes the way we want it, or getting what we want, or what we do when we feel good. But rejoicing is not about us. The root word of rejoice is joy. Joy is not the same as happiness, at least not in the religious sense. Joy is feeling connected to God and to each other. We can express joy when grieving with a person who has lost a loved one. We can express joy when we go through uncomfortable transitions. Joy is God's presence through the Holy Spirit actively connecting us to God and each other. Joy helps us be

creative, courageous, caring, empathetic. Joy helps us appreciate beyond our preferences, and of course, joy praises God in all circumstances.

Rejoicing is joy in action. Rejoicing can be singing, praying, exclaiming God's goodness to our family, friends, community, or the world. Although the author of Luke's Gospel did not record her words, rejoicing is how the woman in today's Gospel responded to Jesus. We don't know if she sang or prayed or exclaimed, but we are given a hint that however she praised God she may have done so a little too loudly, a little too boldly, a little too much for the scholarly decorum of the synagogue that sabbath day, because the leader tried to quiet her joy, to tamper it, to tone it down, by using her joy to criticize Jesus.

This makes the woman in today's Gospel easy for me to relate to. I can relate to expressing joy only to be shut down because someone else wasn't sharing that experience. I see it happen often both on social media and in real life. I've read comments on Facebook or Instagram where someone shamed someone else for showing a gift their spouse gave them for an anniversary because it made the commentor feel the pain of being recently divorced. I have been criticized for being too joyful in leading worship because someone in attendance felt sad and my joy made them feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, there are those who say they left church because it was too somber and depressing. Perhaps these remarks are indications that our society is growing more consumerist, as everything from education to church to work is seen as something that should make them feel like they are the expert, something tailored to their experience, instead of something to participate in by being challenged as well as comforted.

I'm not saying we should ignore those who are hurting, who are grieving. It can be a difficult life lesson to realize everyone else is not always feeling what we are, and it is important to be sensitive to our community. But our pain does not have to diminish another person's celebration or gratitude, nor should anyone's happiness invalidate someone's pain. When we practice joy, when we remember our connection with God and each other, we can discover there is room in our hearts and our lives for more than one emotion at the same time. That is part of the liberating power of God's life-giving love, it makes room for all the complexity of life, instead of weaponizing pain or happiness to force conformity as another type of oppression.

Perhaps the religious leader who tried to repress the woman's joy in our Gospel reading today forgot that the original intention of the sabbath, the reason why God made it part of the 10 Commandments, was for God's people to recognize God values people not for what we are feeling, not for what we produce, not for our busy-ness, not for our perceived status, not for our appearance, not for our abilities

or talents. God values us because God loves us. One expression of that love is God gave people the gift of the sabbath. Sabbath literally means to stop and rest. Sabbath is a reminder God's people are not slaves to Egypt anymore as an embodiment of liberation. This does not mean they were free to do whatever they wanted. It means they were free to live as God's people in the world, to show the world there is another way of living, one where no one needs to be oppressed by anything that prohibits them from loving God and neighbors or following God's will.

The woman in our Gospel today experienced that transformative freedom called liberation. She was released from oppression. Jesus said as much when he said she was set free from her ailment. And her response to liberation was to praise God, showing she felt joy - that holy connection.

Her example in our Gospel today can remind us we all might come into a worship service or open the church email with the pieces of that worship service differently, in different frames of mind or experiencing life differently, and in coming together with those differences, whether it's in person or through the church email, we do so because we are living the sabbath, we are stopping, resting in God's love. To remember God's liberating love is for all people regardless of age, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, health, sexual orientation, and that all of us together can praise God with our hearts, our minds, and our souls. When we realize praising God isn't about us, it's about God, we will find wherever we are, whatever we are going through, God is there with us.

Worship is an act of praise that can help remind us of our connection to God and each other, so that when we go back into the world we can live that joy, that connection, in the world, no matter what condition the world is in. This week is going to be an energetic one for our neighborhood, with classes at OU starting tomorrow and the public schools starting soon after. That first day of school, no matter what age a person is, can be exciting, intimidating, confusing, overwhelming, underwhelming, all on the same day. One way we at Church of the Good Shepherd will live or practice joy, is by being present tomorrow morning on the front porch of the church, just like we have in the past, to offer a blessing on the new academic year. This blessing can be a prayer, it will also be free coffee and donuts and our availability to help those still getting used to campus find their way to wherever they are going. To be here for them, in hopes they realize as the year goes on, whether we are on the porch or not, they aren't alone. Sometimes someone takes up our invitation and sits with us a while and shares some of their story, where they are from, why they are here, what they hope, what they miss. In so doing, they recognize and share the joy we bring to the day. Others, like the religious leader in today's Gospel, have criticism to offer, whether it's criticizing religion in general,

preaching the negative effects of coffee or carbohydrates or sugar in the donuts. They miss the point that the coffee and donuts are a treat, a celebration for a special day, like cake on a birthday. And while the critics might have an opinion, they fail to recognize the connection, and therefore miss out on the joy. And we are there for them too.

Our joy isn't in what we give away. It is not to hear the polite 'thank yous', or criticisms, or the stories a few individuals might share. This is not a way to feel like we are relevant. This isn't about us. It is about striving to show God's healing, liberating love by being present on a day so full of so many emotions for so many of our neighbors. It's our way of noticing our neighbors and letting them know we care about more than ourselves, we care about them.

It's only one way we strive to follow the example of the woman in today's Gospel and join with the crowd at the end of today's Gospel by rejoicing in the wonderful, liberating love of God in Jesus.