

THE FRUIT OF JOY – THE SPIRIT OF LIFE IN WORSHIP

Nehemiah 8:1-8; John 3:1-12

“Contours of Joy” Rev Seth D Jones

Joy, as we said last week, is a state of being which understands the source of our life and, in knowing that source, we can begin to see the joy the Lord takes in Creation and in creating. In joy, the Lord breathed life into the nostrils of the dust creature who became human in Genesis 2. We learned that physical life becomes true life when we receive the Holy Spirit through the blessing and gift of Jesus Christ. It is in this receiving, in this acknowledgment, things begin to flip over and spiritual realities become more fundamental than earthly realities.

Once we recognize the source of true life is God in all of God's essential being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we begin to see the world from a different point of view. We experience the 'revolution of the mind' Paul speaks of in Romans. From here, we begin to see the truth of Jesus' words to Nicodemus about the Spirit: “*8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*”

We see with new eyes from this new perspective, a God-oriented point of view, a Christ-focused angle, a Spirit-led way of seeing. And from this new way of seeing, we begin to experience and sense the *contours of joy* with which the Lord seeks to surround us. The work of the Holy Spirit is to guide us and lead us into regular, recurring and restorative contact with those *contours of joy*.

Here I need to be clear, though. The Holy Spirit leads us and guides us only when we are willing to expose ourselves and open ourselves to the experience of the Holy Spirit. She will not force herself upon us. She will not coerce you into joy. We must become willing vessels who wish to be filled by the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. What I want to be really clear about here is this: we can't just make ourselves do this. We have to learn how to be led and guided by the Holy Spirit. And this is hard, because as we have just heard in Jesus' words that the way of the Spirit is like the wind.

When we were in Montana, we could hear the storms coming from miles away. The wind would precede whatever was blowing in and it would blow through the rocks and the pine trees on the side of the mountains. The sound was like nothing I could describe here – maybe like a train from far away, except not on a single track, more like a thousand trains across an expanse of tracks. It wasn't frightening and it wasn't always loud, but it was always awe-inspiring. As the wind would get closer, it would sound different because it would come in across the marsh behind our house and the weeds and grasses resonated the sound differently. But the wind which blew through the rocks, which blew through the pine trees, which blew through the field was the same wind. Unpredictable, incredibly moving and never quite knowing where it was coming from or where it was going, especially in the mountains where the peaks and valleys could redirect any storm, any cloud or any breeze in ways chaotic and beautiful.

So we are learning about the *contours of joy* from someone who is unpredictable, unseen and spiritual. In order to expose ourselves regularly to such a supernatural being, we need a safe place to do that. We need a place where we can develop trust and confidence in those movements and experiences which are wild, uncontained and powerful. We do this in worship with one another.

Think about worship in this way for a moment: Worship is where we are exposed to the creative force of the Holy Spirit in such a way that we are sent out into the world to share and seek

out this same creative force. We do all sorts of things in the worship experience to make that happen – we pray together, we sing together, we listen together, we speak together, teach, learn, fellowship – in a contained, safe place so we can gain the trust necessary to have the confidence the Holy Spirit will always guide and lead us in ways which honor God and find Christ in the people, families, communities, institutions and environments outside these walls.

Paul says to the Corinthians to “*test yourselves*” He tells them to do this because they must come to a deep and profound realization about who they are. He asks them, “*Do you not realize Christ is in you all?*” Do you not know you are now carriers of the gifts of Jesus Christ and you are called to bring those to others? Paul is telling the Corinthian church this because they have a tremendous opportunity, an opportunity we share as well. It is the opportunity to learn the ways of the Holy Spirit, the ways of the fruit of the Spirit, the *contours of joy* with one another, in a place where we know the presence of Christ is already true by our shared covenant with one another and with God. Wouldn't you rather learn this among people who share what you have rather than trying to learn it where it is you against the world?

The Holy Spirit calls us together. We are called to worship together, to gather to listen and receive the means and symbols of grace with one another. We do so in the midst of great tragedies and great moments of happiness in our lives. We do so because we are called together by something greater, something outside ourselves, someone who wishes us to participate in the great work of redemption of individuals and all of creation.

This is what is happening in Nehemiah 8. The people have been forcibly displaced to Babylon for several generations. After the rediscovery of the Torah, the great ruler of Persia, Cyrus, allowed the Hebrew people to return and rebuild Jerusalem. After the work is completed, the people come together and call upon Ezra to read to them from the Book of the Law. They met for an early outdoor service and everyone – men, women and children gathered together and listened attentively. Sometimes, they would break out into small groups led by teachers and the teachers would explain and lead a discussion about what had been read to the people. After a while, they all prayed together, raising their hands and saying, “*Amen, amen*”. This went on all morning. It was a good four and a half hour service. They may have been the first Baptists, but I don't really know. I only note no one complains in this story about the length of the service.

The worship service in Nehemiah 8 is a powerful moment not only because the people willingly gather together to hear, learn and pray together. It is a powerful moment because it has been so long since such a thing has happened. Some of the people are greatly distressed about how long it has been since they gathered together to honor the Lord. Some are sad about all that has happened to their ancestors home-land. But Ezra calls them to the present and to the future, not to the past. It is as if he says to the people, “*Those things which have happened have gone into the past. Now is a time to celebrate. Now is a time to honor our return to the ways of the Lord.*” So they went into the basement and shared food with one another – cookies, jello molds, baked beans, hamburgers, punch, vegetable plates, brownies. They did this because, as Ezra told them, “*this day is holy to the Lord*”. They did this because, as Ezra told them, “*the Joy of the Lord is your strength.*”

We can read this in two ways and both are legitimate readings. First, we can say “rejoicing in the Lord is your strength”. We gain strength from one another when we rejoice in the power and presence of the Lord. Regardless of the tragedy and the hardship which has befallen all of us, are we able to return to the state of being which we share with the Lord in his creation?

Second, we can say, “The Joy of the Lord, the Joy the Lord takes in you, is your strength.” I like this one better than the first because it means our strength is not dependent on ourselves. Sometimes, we are not capable of rejoicing. Sometimes, we need the community of faith to rejoice

on our behalf. Sometimes, we need the help of the Holy Spirit to even have the strength to be with the people we have committed to be with on a regular basis. But both readings are accurate and true. We are strengthened in our rejoicing of the Lord and our strength comes from the Joy the Lord has in us as a community of faith.

And it is this gathering together, like the people did with Ezra and Nehemiah, in the midst of their destroyed city, in the presence of memories of lost traditions, lost families, lost ways of being, it is this gathering together where we practice the joy of the Lord, where we practice the *contours of joy*. The winds of the Holy Spirit blow upon each of us differently, just as the wind blows differently on the peaks of mountains, through their valleys, past the rocks and pine trees and into the grasses and marshes of the low places. *“Listening to the wind also means that we learn to accept and respect differences in the Spirit's birthing. Whether like the ruach of creation hovering dovelike over the waters of the great deep or like the wind of Pentecost smashing through and filling the whole house, who can control the wind and where it blows? Or who can stop the wind and how it blows? You cannot know its source, but you can feel the wind in your face, hearing it pass and standing where it blows. Nor can you know its destination, but you can let it refresh you and hoist your sails into it. There is no fixed pattern here. As Walter Bruggeman says, “Life is savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence and unrelieved asymmetry.”⁵ “So it is with everyone bom of the Spirit.””* (from Listen! The Wind: A Sermon from John 3:5 by Rev. Glen E. Wiberg, published in *Ex Auditū*).

I have told you of my grandfather, Rudy Speiser. One of his projects, many years ago, was to find out why clouds stay together, what gives them integrity. The Integrity of Clouds. Clouds are like the Holy Spirit – they take a form, then they break apart, join other clouds, disappear, gather together in large ways and small ways. They are unpredictable, seen and then unseen, apparently immaterial, but also very much real. The contours of a cloud are always changing, the currents of the air and the winds of the sky shaping and forming them in ways which are not fixed. So it is with the contours of joy in our life with the Holy Spirit. We come together, here, every Sunday to discover and learn what it is like to come into contact with this changing, yet present, Spirit who seeks to bring us into the constant love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of who already loves us.

This is why Paul can say with confidence and assurance to the church in Philippi, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice.”* Where else will we gain the trust, the assurance and the ability to face the world with the confidence of our faith than in this place, with these people? Where else will you get the practice of what it means to live fully into the gifts of the Spirit, given to each of us by the work of Jesus Christ, than by gathering with these people to pray together, sing together, read Scripture together, learn together, listen together, fellowship together, and of course, eat together, than right here, today, right now? The Holy Spirit invites us into the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit called you here today so you might be in the presence of the contours of joy which are the ways of God and Jesus Christ.

I know, it is an amazing claim. Look to the person on your left. Now the person on your right. Now look at all the people who are here. I know some of you might be thinking, *“These people? These are the ones with whom I am going to discover the joy of the Lord?”* Underneath the illnesses, underneath the tragedies and deaths, underneath the suffering and the pain, underneath the anxieties and worries of our lives, the contours of the joy of a life in the Lord are constantly moving. The Holy Spirit has called us to feel, experience, practice and welcome all of them. And we do it together.

Paul, in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, felt this way about the people who were gathering there: *17 As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made*

orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. 18For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20Yes, you are our glory and joy!

You, brothers and sisters, are each others' glory and joy. You, brothers and sisters in Christ, are each others' glory and joy because your strength comes from the Joy of the Lord. And this is a great gift of the Holy Spirit, who has called you to this time and this place to be her unpredictable, changing partners in the ways of God's joy.

Amen.