

When I was very young, either age 5 or 6 years old, I really understood joy, especially Christmas joy. I remember my Mom and Dad had this makeshift curtain they put up in the hall to make sure my brother and I could not look into the living room when we woke up on Christmas morning. We had to wake up our parents, and wait for them to be ready for us to go in there. I suspect they had to get the camera really ready because I know my reaction was probably thrilling to them. I know it was thrilling to me. To see the gifts appear where it was bare the night before. Awesome. I was filled with joy, Christmas joy. I don't know when I figured it out, but to me it was no wonder we sang Joy to the World as the last Christmas song on Christmas Eve services.

Joy is a natural when considering Christmas. I believe that is still true for me, even as the thrill about Christmas has changed and I understand the ramification of who Jesus really is for me personally in my life. Joy has an important place in the Christian life. It is one of the 9 fruits of the spirit a Christian is to have as part of your life. Yet I wonder, why is it that when so many Christians come to worship, there is this somber look which we have when we worship. If the Christian life is to be joy filled, shouldn't we look joyful?

I often wonder why we don't. Tom Mullen, one of my favorite Christian authors has wondered about this too. He states that one of the problems is that too many Christians look upon the sermon as not merely the central act of worship, but even more it is the "pies-de-resistance". He notes, it is not always easy to make the sermon joyful and interesting. He writes, "There are more than 5 million sermons preached in a year, and many are dull, if most church-goers are to be believed. Jokes abound about dull sermons. For example: What is the difference between a good sermon and a bad one? It is a nap.

The eternal Gospel does not require an everlasting sermon." And "if all the people who fell asleep in church on a given Sunday were placed end to end, they would be more comfortable."

I hope those quips brought you a little bit of joy. I state these not merely to make you smile, but to also point out that the Christian life is not meant to be dull.

The Christian life and worship experience is meant to be a joyful time. Granted there may be times when the sermon or music or whatever portion drags, but that does not mean that the Christian life is not to have joy in it. Joy is essential for the Christian life. And it is experienced through the message of the church.

The point that Tom Mullen made in his essay was not that sermons are dull. But the truly amazing fact is that the message of Jesus, His love and the new life He offers, transcends the preaching it has survived. We should not forget that fact.

For in the message of Jesus lies the source of joy for the Christian life.

The experience of joy comes not from how many jokes one hears or how often one laughs; the experience of joy in the Christian life come from knowing God as a God of love and grace. Where the church comes in for this process is that the church is the place where we can gather with other Christians to share about this aspect of living the Christian life. And yes, that means gathering in times beyond the walls of the sanctuary. This kind of sharing probably occurs more often in places like a narthex or the Fellowship Hall. These are places where God's people gather to share about life.

Conversations occur that are important to wellbeing of Christians. Countless are the inspirational moments when I have shared with people about the good life in Christ outside sanctuary walls. When I consider my history of faith and belief, what has occurred in fellowship halls of churches, and camps, classrooms, parking lots, they are all extremely important to my faith development. They are places I look back on, smile remembering the joy of many of those experiences.

In our text for today, we can note that this was true too for the early church. Our lesson has Peter and John sharing the Gospel with a person, and it was not in a time of worship. It was outside at the gate of the temple. This was a parking

lot type conversation. What occurs is that in conversation with the man who was lame and begging for money, Peter and John share about Jesus. We do not know details of what their conversation was about, but we do know one thing.

The man heard about who Jesus was, believed and became joyful. He was healed and our text says, he began walking and leaping and praising God. Here is a man who possessed joy. Joy to such an extent it almost embarrassed Peter and John. We know this because if you read on in Acts 3, they didn't stay with him, yet people sought them out. They wanted to know what they did for the man, and Peter and John point not to what they did but to Jesus.

Jesus is the source of joy. A relationship with Jesus is where one encounters the powerful experience of God. This does happen in our world today too. Joy is a part of the Christian life. There is an element of joy which is shared in the stories of faith. Yes, sometimes there are tears, but mostly we sense joy from God's working in our world. When Jesus comes into our lives, it is a powerful experience. This is true when we think of the Christmas joy.

Please don't limit your understanding of Christmas joy as only that which has to do with Jesus as a baby in a stable. There is that truth. But Christmas joy is more than that. Christmas joy has to do with anytime you recognize Jesus as Lord and the source of true joy in living life.

Tim Wallace, pastor of a Baptist church in Maryland, shares this story of a man who came to know this type of joy. His friend had been talking with him at work, had brought him to a few men's breakfasts. Then one day, his friend really urged him to come to worship on this special service they were having. There were a great number in the congregation that night and it was the man's first time in a church like that. He took in all the service with keen interest. As the service was concluding, an invitation to Christian discipleship happened.

Tim Wallace, who gave the invitation, said, "Anyone who wants to commit their life to Christ, please raise your hand and people will pray for you." Well, the man's hand shot up in the air. Then Tim asked, "if any of the persons who raised their hands wanted to come forward to claim Jesus and even be baptized today, come right up." This time the man bounded forward. After he got up front, he kind of stood there stiff and erect, now nervous. Tim asked him, "Do you believe Jesus died to save sinners such as yourself."

The man replied, "I want to take Jesus as my Savior and be baptized to have my sins taken away." So Tim took the man to the baptistery, which was a full baptistery, immersed the man, and when he came out of the water, he clapped his hands and shouted, "Hot dog! Hot dog! Hot dog!" The congregation roared with laughter, and Tim writes that he had to quickly ask for silence. Then he explained to the people, "This man had not been around a church. He didn't know the religious terms they use like "Amen", "Halleluiah" or "Praise God". His word was "Hot dog" which was praising God with the vocabulary he knew.

Folks, I would consider that a type of Christmas joy. It is knowing Jesus for the first time, his birth into our lives. In fact, I would say Christmas joy happens anytime we remember Jesus coming into our lives. That to me is a tremendous reason to celebrate Christmas and the joy it brings. In the Christian life, joy has an important place. As I began this sermon, I spoke of the joy which radiated in me when I first went through that curtain in my early childhood home. I saw a place transformed with presents.

I have come to have those joyful experiences at many other times in my life too. Joy bubbles up when I know and share about God's presents and presence in my life. If you have not had a good Christian conversation recently sharing about God's presents and presence in your life, make an effort to do so soon. It will help with your joy and allowing joy to come for others.