

December 6, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Philippians 2:2–11](#)

TITLE: Making Joy Complete

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

To not talk today about the Covid pandemic we are all living through feels phony, like giving you a Hallmark card while the birthday candles have set the curtains on fire. But to talk about the pandemic—to say once more what this season feels like, the lives it is taking, the jobs, careers and personal finances it is destroying, well, I'm not sure we have the emotional energy to think about it, burning curtains or not. The line we will walk in this sermon is to acknowledge the reality of the pandemic without allowing it to be the only reality—because it's not. For that, thanks be to God.

Last Sunday Pastor BJ kicked off the season of Advent by reminding us of the beauty found in the opening verses of John 1: *In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. This word became flesh and dwelled with us—made a home with us.* Our theme for the four weeks of Advent is the incarnation, God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, coming to be with us, to dwell with us. Not only did that mean something back in the 1st century CE, it means a lot today. Right now—Covid crisis and all. As followers of Christ, we daily trust that God is with us. Given that fact, how should we live our lives now? Well, advice on this comes from the apostle Paul, found in the verses of Philippians 2 where he says: Make my joy complete. Do nothing from selfishness but regard others as better than yourselves. Look to the interests of others. Have the same mind as Christ Jesus.

That feels like a tall order. We've already given up so much lately. We scarcely go out. We wear masks. We keep our distance. We've been doing this for months and this Covid reality isn't going to change anytime soon. Yet Paul wants us to humble ourselves more, to look to the needs of others more, and through that our joy will be complete? Well yes, it is true. So relax and trust for a moment. Paul knows what he's talking about.

Humble yourself—have the same mind as Christ Jesus. Back in 1974, the nominees for the national book award for poetry were Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, and Allen Ginsberg. When the women learned they were nominated, they reached out to one another and decided if any one of them won, they would accept on behalf of all three and read a speech they had written together. So when Adrienne Rich's name was called, she said, *We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, believe we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other. We will share this prize among us and we dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, the mother, the dishwasher, the mathematician, the pregnant teenager, the teacher, the waitress, the philosopher; the silent women whose voices have been denied, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.*¹

There is something powerful and inspiring in that decision by those talented women to share any prize that might be awarded them. They each had a strong sense of self and

pride in their own creative writing, yet their self-love included space for love of others. We all know people who are a tad narcissistic, folks who need to be the center of every conversation and who need a steady diet of compliments and affirmations. Narcissists have a self-love that is obsessed with keeping what it has and adding more of the same. That's why it is so boring. There is never any growth. It clings; it holds on; it whines and pushes others away even as it craves their attention.²

The psychotherapist and Zen master Karlfried Durckheim used to say: "You can never kill the ego; you only find that it lives in a larger house than you thought." A healthy self finds a larger house to dwell in than just a house where everyone coddles us and responds to our whims. A healthy self steps out into the world; it meets people, works with people, cares for others, and commits to their well-being. This is not just a psychological truth; it's a spiritual truth. The human self cannot be healthy unless it grows, and for us as creatures made in the image of God, to grow is to love.³ Out of love, the divine Word became flesh. Out of love, Christ came to dwell with us, to make a home with us. He did not count equality with God as something to be grasped and clung to, but instead emptied himself, being born in human likeness—why? Out of love, so that our selves might grow and we might live in a larger house than we ever dreamed possible.

Paul wonderfully links this idea of humble, expansive love with the concept of joy – of making joy complete. In almost every Presbyterian church service there's a time for announcements. Remember the phrase ministers use to set up this part of the service? We'll often say, "Now it is time for the sharing of joys and concerns." You'll hear about church bake sales and food drives, about committee meetings at 7:00 and bible study on Tuesdays. And you'll likely hear both requests for prayer and testimonies about answered prayers—people having surgery and those who are in remission from cancer; church friends out of work or those who just got new jobs. We need this time of sharing on Sundays. For all the vertical aspect of lofty hymns, bible readings and sermons that help us get through the week, we need the horizontal, personal connection of these other-centered prayer requests and tangible announcements.⁴ They describe something more than happiness and peace; they are moments of joy.

Let me briefly review what I've said so far. In this difficult season of pandemic isolation, I told about three women poets who believed it was better to share a prize rather than possess it alone. They modeled a type of expansive self-love—an ego willing to live in a larger house than was thought possible. On a spiritual level, this is important because the self cannot be fully itself unless it grows—and as creatures made in the image of God, the way to grow is to love. So what results from this type of growth? What happens when we do nothing from selfish ambition but in humility look after the interests of others? What happens when we imitate the same mind that was in Christ Jesus? Well, what happens is that we discover joy, which is something much more than pleasure and happiness. We discover joy as children of an incarnate God and our joy is made complete.

A couple days ago I was doing an errand on my way home from work. It was an overcast, gray Pittsburgh afternoon—so what else is new? I was wearing my mask. I was going to be quickly and safely handed something I purchased from a store in Squirrel Hill—no poking around to see what else was on their shelves; no chatter about the weather or the Steelers or life in general with whomever was working behind the counter. It was a typical errand in this untypical, frustrating season we're in. But as I walked back to my car, I saw this slogan stenciled onto the sidewalk: *The worst doesn't happen often*. This was no superficial Hallmark card sentiment. We all know that sometimes the worst does happen—bad things do happen—we are disappointed, frustrated, and anxious. But the stenciled message wasn't cynical. Just the opposite. It reminds us that the worst isn't the norm, but rather the exception to the norm. Yes, it does happen, but it doesn't happen often. No, what happens often is actually the good—and sometimes the good that happens turns out to be really good, even wonderful.

The sidewalk poet reminded me that I can fixate on what is the worst, or I can look beyond myself and grow and look for what is actually more common. I can seek to dwell in a larger house. I can open myself to others joys and concerns. I can breathe and trust that moving about in this world is the incarnate Christ, the one who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness; one humbled by a cross yet exalted by a resurrection that proclaims the worst is not what's real. Remembering that is life-giving. Remembering that is healing in a time of dis-ease and anxiety. Remembering that is how joy becomes complete.

I began today's service pointing to three key symbols of our faith: the lit candle of the Advent wreath—symbolizing the Christ child, God dwelling with us; the communion table—the place of Christ's last supper in which he offered himself in love for us; and the cross—empty now because the crucified one has been raised to new life. Breathe in the fullness of that good news. Look beyond this moment and look to the needs of those around you. Grow in who you are. And trust in the promise, the hope, and yes, the complete joy, given to us in Christ.

¹ Anecdote quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Homiletical Perspective: Mike Graves, and recorded in *The Feminist Press.Tumblr.com*.

² Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, pp. 175, 1985.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴ Cf. Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, p. 281.