<u>June 29: The Fruit of Joy *(Galatians 5:22-25)*</u>
Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruit of the Spirit, a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We're looking at one fruit each Sunday, with the goal of offering some practical ways for us to grow in our faith. Today we're studying the fruit of joy, and how it can help us respond to the pain and injustice in our world. We're so glad you're joining us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next few months.

Before we begin, please take a moment to pray with me.

God of all good gifts, you show us the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. How we need this right now, God; we come into your presence with open hands and ask for your gift of joy to renew and empower us. In your son Jesus' name, amen.

The last few weeks of news have been rough, haven't they? No matter where you stand politically, you don't have to go far to encounter weighty, heartbreaking stories of injustice and human suffering and growing fear, both in our own nation and internationally. And as I began to prepare this sermon, part of me wondered if preaching about joy might seem wildly jarring and out of touch with what so many of us are grappling with right now.

But then, as I started to pay attention to joy, I noticed it popping up everywhere, in words and actions and the beauty around me and even a silly language-learning story on my Duolingo app – joy that exists not just in spite of all the hard and heartbreaking things going on, but sometimes in direct response to them. During the speeches that kicked off Kitsap's Juneteenth celebration, one of the speakers identified love and joy as our primary "weapons" of resistance to injustice – and just a few days later, I found that same claim in a 1972 memoir by Madeleine L'Engle, the beloved author of *A Wrinkle in Time.* She was writing in the midst of America's traumatic war with Vietnam, and after alluding to the ongoing violence and horror around her which showed no signs of stopping, she wrote this: "I do not think it naïve to think that it is the tiny, particular acts of love and joy which are going to swing the balance."[1]

[1] Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (San Francisco: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), p.124.

Let me repeat that: "I do not think it naïve to think that it is the tiny, particular acts of love and joy [the first two fruits of the Spirit] which are going to swing the balance."

Do you believe that? It's not that hard to see how acts of love can change things – love is a strong motivator for self-sacrifice and courage, and the whole story of Jesus is a story about how love can change our hearts and transform the world. But joy feels more self-focused than love, an emotion that primarily benefits us and makes us feel good. What does joy, and acts of joy, have to do with justice and resistance and changing the world for the better? What actually is joy, anyway? How do we cultivate it? And what does an act of joy look like?

Those are the questions that shaped this sermon. In the next few minutes, I'm going to try to sketch out a picture of joy – a very rough, incomplete picture, because joy is incredibly complex. I'm going to make the case that joy is a foundational part of both our humanity and of any effective, sustained struggle for justice. Finally, I'll close with some practical suggestions about how to grow joy in our own lives.

Let me start with a question – if you were put on the spot, how many of you could define joy? It's harder than you think. The top Google search for "joy" defines it as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness" – and I feel that gets as close to the heart of joy as if I defined my husband, Luke, as a "51-year-old man who's five feet nine inches tall, with dark hair and brown eyes." That's true, and it might help you pick Luke out of a lineup – but you also might get mixed up, and choose somebody who bears a similarity to Luke but isn't him at all. It's the same with joy - joy includes feelings of pleasure and happiness, but goes way beyond them – you can experience pleasure without joy, and you can be surprised by joy in situations of profound unhappiness. And I believe that joy is as multifaceted and complex as each individual person on this earth.

And so instead of trying to define joy for you, I'm going to give you two different vignettes, or snapshots, of joy, and then use those stories to sketch a portrait of joy that goes beyond happiness and pleasure.

The first little vignette of joy I want to give you is fairly recent, and it spotlights Marie Kondo and her life-changing magic of tidying up. Marie Kondo is a Japanese organizing superstar who was named as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in 2015. She popularized a method of decluttering

centered on joy, where you sort through all of your stuff and determine which possessions spark joy in you. To figure out this out, you physically touch or hold everything you own. "When something sparks joy," writes Marie, "you should feel a little thrill, as if the cells in your body are slowly rising. When you hold something that doesn't bring joy, however, you will notice that your body feels heavier."[2] If something sparks joy, you keep it, treasure it, organize it, and savor it – and if it doesn't spark joy, you thank it for its service and send it on its way.

Marie Kondo writes that the perspective we gain through this sorting process helps us know who we are and "represents the driving force that can make not only our lifestyle, but our very lives, shine" – it increases our "sensitivity to joy" and helps us "create a bright and joyful future."[3]

So there's one vignette of joy, as something we can learn to recognize, choose, generate, and maintain through our actions and our carefully organized, joy-sparking possessions.

For my second story of joy, I'm going back in time 2000 years to the Roman empire, to spotlight an unjustly-imprisoned man with no home or permanent possessions. Although he had once had societal status and power, he lost it all through his choice to preach and live out the good news of Jesus, and his future was uncertain – he knew his imprisonment could end in death. Even some fellow Christians, who should have loved and supported him, were going around slandering him to the churches he founded – and there was nothing he could do about it. His hands were tied (or maybe even chained). And yet – the letter that this man, Paul, wrote to the church in Philippi (which is now the New Testament book of Philippians) is so overflowing with joy and gladness that it's known as the Epistle of Joy.

It's a wildly different picture of joy than Marie Kondo, isn't it? Yet I believe that both vignettes tell us something true about what joy is, and I want to hold them both together as we sketch our composite portrait of joy.

One thing I think Marie Kondo gets right is that joy is embodied, bound up with physical things on this earth that we experience with our senses, *and* it's intensely individual – things that spark joy are as particular and diverse as

[2] Marie Kondo, *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up* (Berkeley, Ten Speed Press, 2016), p.8.
[3] Marie Kondo, *Spark Joy,* p.xii.

each person on this earth. Things that sparked joy for me over the last week included the smell of rain on pavement, the smoothness and bright colors of the summer sheets on our bed, the special coffee mug from France that my daughter gave me and the taste of the fresh-brewed coffee it held, the bouquet of lavender and yellow roses Luke picked for me, and the heated seats of our new car. There is something deeply good about choosing to surround ourselves with objects and experiences that spark joy in us and indulging in the "simple joys" of embodied life.

I believe that joy is our birthright. It's an attribute of God, and so it's encoded throughout creation and woven into us, as human beings made in God's image. Each of us was created for infinite joy, and when we taste joy and enter into it, we're living as we were created to be – we're becoming more fully ourselves. C.S. Lewis describes joy as a longing or a deep yearning of the soul that can be sparked by physical objects and embodied experiences – just like Marie Kondo writes about – but is never completely satiated by them – joy feels like an "unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction," a "desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be.'"[4] Joy reminds us of what we were created for and is a promise of what we're destined for. All joy is a gift – in fact, the Greek word for joy is "*chara*", and it's almost identical to *"charis",* the word for grace. Like grace, we don't have to do anything to earn joy or merit joy – it overflows from the heart of God, and nobody is excluded.

There is an unselfconsciousness about joy – even though it involves expressing ourselves in all our particularity, we experience joy most deeply when we're not inwardly focused. Pleasure can easily become self-centered, and so can the pursuit of happiness, but true joy always involves connection: connection with creation, connection with the divine, and connection with each other. If you think back to some of the most joyful moments of your life, my guess is that they involve other people that you love – for me, the most joyful part of my last few family vacations has simply been seeing my kids, who are currently spread out around the world, all together again with us. Even Marie Kondo eventually gave up perfect tidiness in order to spend time with her young kids, saying that she realized that was what truly sparked joy in her.[5]

[4] C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Walker & Co., 1955), p.25, 114.
[5] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/mar/30/how-marie-kondo-changed-her-mind-about-mess#:~:text=1%20year%20old-

And in Paul's letter to the Philippians, it's clear that he finds some of his deepest joy in his connection with them: he begins his letter by writing that "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel," (Philippians 1:4), and he concludes his letter by addressing the church as "my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown" (Philippians 4:1). Perhaps most amazing, joy is what God experiences in connection with us: in Luke 15, Jesus told three parables that personify God as a shepherd gathering friends to rejoice over finding a lost sheep; as a woman throwing a joyful party because she found a lost coin; and as an overjoyed father racing down the road to embrace his son who had been lost, then pausing everything in order to celebrate his return in grand style.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who suffered as a prisoner of war during WW II, wrote that because joy is so bound up in human connection, "compassion is the other side of the living joy."[6] And this is where joy becomes a very vulnerable emotion, entangled with suffering and loss. When we allow ourselves to feel deep joy in our connection with somebody, we also accept the possibility – indeed, the certainty – of heartbreak, because we live in a world where hard and unjust things happen to people who spark joy in us. They will be hurt, and so will we. And the more people we allow ourselves to connect with and rejoice in, the more hurt we open ourselves up to, and the more we will be upset by injustice and inequity when it affects them. But if we wall up our hearts so that we are not hurt or moved by the sorrow and heartbreak of others, we also close ourselves off to deep connection and deep joy.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who helped to lead the nation of South Africa out of apartheid, said that "Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that enables rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without becoming broken."[7]

Joy doesn't protect us from suffering – in fact, it may even lead us into suffering. Yet, it is often in the midst of deep suffering and injustice that joy surprises us, and becomes the very resource we need to resist and overcome.

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[6] Jürgen Moltmann, "Christianity: A Religion of Joy", from *Joy and Human Flourishing; Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p.14

[7] Desmond Tutu, from *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (New York: Avery, 2016), p.12

I want to return to Paul, sitting in a Roman prison and writing to the church he loved in Philippi. Paul was in a situation not of his choosing, with very little control over his future, and probably had limited opportunity to surround himself with objects that sparked joy. And yet, he was filled with joy that had nothing to do with his bleak circumstances. In Philippians 2:17-18, he writes to his friends: "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me." And this experience of joy in the midst of suffering is repeated throughout the New Testament, from the disciples getting berated and publicly flogged in Acts 5, then rejoicing that they had been "counted worthy of suffering disgrace" for the sake of Jesus' name; to Paul and Silas singing hymns in in prison after they were beaten in Acts 16, to the Thessalonian church, who welcomed Jesus' message "in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 1:5). This isn't joy that denies or rejoices in the suffering itself – it's not toxic positivity. Instead, joy is the quality that can make pain and suffering creative rather than destructive.

This kind of joy – the joy that comes to us in suffering to surprise and empower us – is a special gift of God's Spirit. It's something irrational and unexpected, which means it can't be withheld or controlled or legislated by any human power. As we read together today in Galatians, against such things as joy, there is no law. There's an old African American spiritual about joy that says, "the world didn't give it to me, and the world can't take it away." And this means that joy is a powerful weapon of resistance against evil and oppression.

There's an energy and creativity and wildness in joy that radiates out and disarms evil. Oppressors wield control through appeals to fear, and anger, and despair. They speak the language of scarcity. Joy disrupts that narrative – it's all about abundance, about daring to flourish and claim what no oppressor can ever take away. Joy resists conformity and challenges the status quo. Joy comes from a place of freedom.

Dictators know this, which is why they almost always move to squelch the arts and control things that might spark joy. Ari Honarvar, an Iranian American woman, writes that "Those of us who lived through the fundamentalist power grab in Iran experienced a revolution of joylessness. Perhaps the most radical act of resistance in the face of adversity is to live joyfully."[8]

[8] https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/coronavirus-community-power/2020/05/09/coronavirus-nurturing-joy

I believe that joy in the midst of suffering always goes hand in hand with hope. When we dare to feel joy in the midst of suffering and oppression, when we dance and sing in the face of evil, when we revel in beauty, when we savor those things that are deeply good, it's a way of proclaiming that pain and suffering and injustice and fear will never have the last word – joy is what is solid and lasting. Hebrews 12:2 says that "for the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame." What motivated and sustained Jesus through the suffering of and abandonment and pain of crucifixion was joy. When we set our eyes on Jesus, we turn towards joy.

But how do we live into joy and live out joy? Because joy is a gift, we can't earn it or directly pursue it – but we can learn how to receive and nurture it, and I have three practices to help us do that.

Before I get into these practices, I want to acknowledge that sometimes, joy feels completely unavailable, no matter what we do. There are times when we need the help of others, perhaps even medical treatment, to bring us to the point where we can even engage in practices that nurture joy – I've been there myself. And there should be no shame in asking for help. If you feel that this describes you, please talk with Pastor Meg or myself or call the mental health support line at 988 to figure out your next step towards healing.

With that caveat, the first joy-cultivation practice I suggest is to completely ignore and avoid the news for one day each week. It's important to know what's happening in the world, but the news – even when it's coming from a reliable source – focuses on what's wrong and unjust, stoking fear and outrage – it forms us. Even when the news tells us what's true, it doesn't give us the whole truth. There are so many things and people out there that are good and life-giving and joy-sparking, and giving ourselves a news-Sabbath one day a week helps us see and notice them more clearly.

The second practice that helps us cultivate joy is gratitude. Researcher Brené Brown says that she never talks about joy without talking about gratitude, because in 12 years of work, she has never interviewed anybody who talks about the capacity to experience joy who does not also actively practice gratitude.[9] And that makes sense, because gratitude is what keeps us attentive to the countless things that are good in the world and in our lives, reminding us of the many gifts God delights to give us. Remember how *chara* is joy is Greek and *charis* is grace? Well, *eucharis* is gratitude – it's all related! Luke and

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKV0BWSPfOw

I just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary at Neah Bay, and one of the best moments of the whole trip was when we were walking along Shi Shi Beach and took a few moments to express gratitude for where we were, for each other, and for the past 25 years together. It catapulted us into joy.

The practice of gratitude works best when it's specific. Maybe you can start with the day that you don't check the news. Be intentional about noticing what sparks joy that day, and simply say thank you when you notice. Thank other people throughout the day for what they do. Slow down to really savor something you enjoy – savoring a gift shows deep gratitude to the giver. Perhaps you can share one specific thing you're grateful for with somebody at the end of each day, or even write it down. (One bonus of writing things down is that making a gratitude list is on your summer Bingo card, so you'll be able to check that off!)

And finally, joy is about connection, so take time, at least once a week, to do something specific to spark joy for another person – either someone you know, or a stranger – engage in a tiny, particular act of love and joy – because those tiny acts are powerful, and they swing the balance. If you need an idea, there are a lot of suggestions on the Bingo card.

There we are: skip the news once a week; practice gratitude and savoring; and spark joy in somebody else. Deceptively simple practices to help us receive and live out the joy that God longs to fill us with.

I want to close with this assurance: Joy is always a promise. We can risk and trust joy now, even when it comes blurred with pain, because we believe it is a faithful foretaste of the future God is leading us into, when we will go out in joy and be led forth in peace, the mountains and the hills will burst into song before us, and all the trees of the fields will clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12). Amen.

Explore more about joy & justice!

- Hear ornithologist & poet Drew Landers read his poem titled, "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves": https://onbeing.org/poetry/joy-is-the-justice-we-give-ourselves/
- Listen to Iranian-American Ari Honarvar's Ted Talk on joy as resistance & savoring intervention: https://rumiwithaview.com/2024/09/04/freedom/
- Brené Brown & Oprah talk about joy & gratitude: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKV0BWSPfOw