

Year C, December 16, 2018
3 Advent
Christ Church, Mexia

The lessons for today deal with joy. Well, it may be difficult to hear joy in the gospel reading, which begins with "you brood of vipers" and other seeming downers. But even it is important because it ultimately tells us what we need to do in order to experience joy.

Bruce Larson reminds us that: "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a pivotal Christian thinker of our time, said: 'Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.' (Think about that for a moment) This Jesuit priest-theologian-anthropologist had a good deal in common with the Presbyterian sages who penned the Westminster Confession of Faith. The bottom line for you and me is simply this: grimness is not a Christian virtue. (In other words) There are no sad saints. If God is the center of one's life and being, joy is inevitable. If we have no joy, we have missed the heart of the Good News and our bodies as much as our souls will suffer the consequences." (*There's a Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*)

Here we might consider the relationship between joy and happiness. According to *compassion.com*, among other sources: There's a difference between joy and happiness. But what that difference is, is difficult to define. Generally, joy is an underlying truth that good or bad circumstances can't dictate; while happiness is rooted in circumstance. We are happy in good circumstances; in bad, not so much. In the Bible, for example, joy tends to be recalling God's acts and hence God's love for us, such as deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt or the return from exile in Babylonia. In the Psalms, joy comes from encountering God, or believers rejoice because of God's love for them or the promise of salvation. Happiness depends on external factors and is considered an emotion which is transient. Joy is an attitude that is more resilient, longer lasting.

Here are some other ways of thinking about the differences:
Joy is in the heart. Happiness is on the face.
Joy exists. Happiness reacts.
Joy is an inner feeling. Happiness is an outward expression.
Joy is of the soul. Happiness is of the moment.
Joy is a choice, a practice and a behavior; it's deliberate and intentional. Happiness is a reaction to pleasant circumstance.

In a similar vein, Sherwood Wirt in his book, *Jesus, Man of Joy*, writes:

“C.S. Lewis told me, there is too much solemnity and intensity in dealing with sacred matters, too much speaking in holy tones. The tragic loss in all this pious gamesmanship is to the individual in the pew, who begins to feel that in the midst of the religious razzle-dazzle he (or she) cannot get through to the Lord Himself.

We have learned that joy is more than a sense of the comic, more than earthly pleasure, and to a believer even more than what we call happiness. Joy is the enjoyment of God and the good things that come from the hand of God. (For example) If our new freedom in Christ is a piece of angel food cake, joy is the frosting. If the Bible gives us wonderful words of life, joy supplies the music. If the way to heaven turns out to be an arduous steep climb, joy sets up the chairlift.”

And this brings me to what I believe Luke was trying to tell us today. The people, the tax collectors, the soldiers want to know what they are supposed to do to escape God’s wrath or, looking at it from a different direction, to experience joy. Share what you have, treat people with respect and honesty, be content with what you have – not constantly wanting more. In other words, care for those in need, seek justice and equality and peace and have integrity. Living in this way allows us to better experience God in our lives. And when we do that we will know true joy. Again, “Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.”

In closing, let me suggest this: tomorrow or someday in the near future, when you awake in the morning, make a vow to do everything you do that day for God – don’t do it for yourself, your family or work, do it for God. I don’t care what you do, if it’s washing dishes, sweeping the floor – no matter how menial the task, do it as though you are doing it for God. If you are like me, you’ll find that you try a lot harder and you receive much more joy. Of course, it would be nice to do some of the things that God asks us to do for others as a part of our work that day. Then it will be even more meaningful and more joyous.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.