Assorted Scriptures *Engaging with Joy: Bring Joy*

***Grumpy Church***There is a quote that is often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi that probably didn’t come from him; but it reflects a sentiment that many non-Christians probably agree with. **It goes like this:**

I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.

It is, I hope, a convicting statement. As Christians, it should be a goal of ours to reflect well on Jesus. I would hope that people would have a good impression of Jesus by looking at those who identify as His followers. And yet, too often, it is Christians who end up giving Jesus a bad reputation.

There are lot of reasons this happens. Sometimes Christians are hypocritical. Sometimes Christians are judgmental. Sometimes Christians are angry. But there’s one thing that I think gives people the wrong impression of Jesus more than any other thing: in a word, it’s that Christians are grumpy. John Ortberg writes:

If we were to look at the average Christian, and (reasonably) assume that we are trying to learn from God to be like God, we might assume that God is a relatively grumpy being. We are so grumpy ourselves that we would have to assume our God is miserable. (From the foreword of *Happy Church*, by Tim McConnell, p. 9)

In the James Joyce novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the main character contemplates becoming a priest. But then he has a vision of what would happen to his face, how it would become like the faces of other religious people he knew: “a mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day… sourfavored and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger.” Ortberg asks:

How often have people misunderstood God because they attributed to him the grim, judgmental, defensive, soul-wearying spirit of many who claim to be his followers? (*The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, p. 64)

I think there is something in human nature that makes us believe that religion should come with a certain amount of pain. We tend to associate the practice of our faith with words like sacrifice and reverence and duty; and so we have the nagging feeling that if we find some sort of pleasure in the practice of our faith we must be doing it wrong.

I’ve been a preacher now for more than two decades, and I’ve had the opportunity over the years to fill the pulpit in a number of other congregations. And I’ve joked that in some of those churches, if I were not the preacher, I would not have wanted to be there on Sunday morning. Too many churches give off the vibe that Sunday morning attendance is a duty to be fulfilled—a box to be checked—but it is not something to be enjoyed.

Of course, as the preacher on those occasions, I probably had more to do with that vibe than I care to admit.

But here’s the thing that I am convinced of: Grumpy Christians do not accurately reflect Jesus. Grumpy churches do not give a good picture of what God is truly like. John Ortberg again:

God is not a grumpy God. God created all things out of nothing by sheer love. God made everything good and beautiful just because he wanted it that way. God is a joy-loving and a joy-giving God…

He continues:

One of the primary purposes of the church, one of the main reasons why God has placed a church on earth and gathered us up to be a part of it, is so the world can know who he is by looking at the people he redeems and gathers.

And then he asks **these vital questions**:

* Do our gatherings reflect a fundamentally happy and joyful God?
* Can you taste and see that the Lord is good when you gather in Christian fellowship at our church?
* Does our church stand out in our community as a reservoir of happiness?
* Are we participating in the joy of God? (*Happy Church*, p. 10)

It is my hope that our church can answer each of these questions with an immediate and resounding “Yes!” It is my hope that our church is thought of as a joyful church that worships and serves a joyful God.

***Engaging with Joy***This week we are starting a quick but extremely important three-week series of sermons. We’re calling it “Engaging with Joy” and it is meant to help us all focus in on and reflect upon our mission statement. In addition to the sermons, we are also holding workshops in the Harbor during the Sunday School hour. We’ve also printed these booklets, for the series, that have pages for sermon notes as well as discussion questions for the workshops. The idea is to get us all thinking and talking about our mission statement.

This is **our mission statement:**

We are here to Bring Joy to Jesus and to Experience Joy in Him.

This has been our mission statement at Hope Church for the past 12 years. We often shorten it to the four words you see on our logo: “Bring Joy. Experience Joy.” For me, at least, it’s an important part of who we are as a church. But, like a lot of things that have been around for a while, maybe we get so used to it that we stop thinking about it. Or, if you are newer to the church, maybe you’ve never heard an explanation of what this mission statement means.

So this past spring, we put together an online survey and emailed it out to people who are regular attendees of our church. Something like 180 of you filled out at least some of the survey, for which we are grateful. And one of the things we asked you to do was put our mission statement into your own words. We wanted to see whether or not we are on the same page with our mission statement—if this statement is helping us move in the same direction as a church. And a lot of your answers were pretty good. Here were some that stood out to me:

**To me this statement** means that we are to live our lives fully through Christ. By doing this we are able to experience joy in Him which brings joy to the Father. It’s a full circles kind of idea.

I like that. It’s a full circles kind of idea. We live for Christ, which means we experience joy, which brings joy to the Father. It’s a full circles kind of thing. Or this one:

**Glorifying God in all we say** or do is what brings us the greatest possible joy and fulfillment.

That’s a good summary. Or this one:

**To learn and be reminded** to live a life pleasing to God which in return will make me happy and have fun while doing it.

That’s the idea—when we make a priority out of living for God we find we are living the best life possible—and that makes us happy and even means we can have fun along the way. Or this one, probably my favorite:

**Jesus is in our lives,** and we like it!

That’s why we’re here as a church. Because Jesus is in our lives, and we like it! We are here to bring joy to Jesus, and to experience joy in Him.

Reading the responses on the survey was a lot of fun. As a staff, we decided that about 55% of those who responded had a pretty good understanding of our mission statement.

But, at the same time, that meant that about 45% of the respondents did not have a good understanding. That doesn’t mean their answers were bad, or unbiblical. There were a lot of answers that would have made good mission statements for our church as well. They just didn’t show a good understanding of what we mean by Bring Joy, Experience Joy. So that’s why we decided to have this series. We want to engage everybody with this joy.

Today, I’m going to focus on the first part of the statement, the part that says we are here to bring joy to Jesus. And, as you can see if you have the booklet opened to the sermon notes, I want to make three points: God is a joyful God; we can affect God’s joy; and the purpose of the church is to bring God joy.

***The Happy God***
First, **God is a joyful God.** It is crucial for us to have a picture of God who is, by nature, happy.

When we talk about the attributes of God, the fact that God is joyful is often neglected. In most theology books, when they list the characteristics of God, things like God’s love and God’s grace and God’s justice will be emphasized—as they should be—but you won’t often see joy mentioned as an essential part of His character. But it is.

In 1 Timothy 1:11 the apostle Paul is taking about the kind of sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel of God. Here’s **how he phrases it:**

**11**that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

It’s interesting that Paul calls God “blessed.” “Blessed” is not normally a word that we use to describe God, because it is a word which describes something God does for us. God bestows blessings on us. We think of blessings as gifts from God.

But New Testament scholars will tell you that the word “blessed” can also mean “happy.” The logic is simple: a person who is blessed is happy. It means to be in a state worthy of congratulations.

So when Paul describes God as the “blessed” God, he’s really describing Him as the happy God. God lives in a state worthy of congratulations. God is happy.

Of course, there’s something about the word “happy” that may seem trivial. Happiness can seem like a superficial emotion, something that is contingent on immediate circumstances. For human beings, anyway, happiness often seems dependent on what is “happening” at the moment. So for sinful human beings who live in a sinful world, happiness often comes and goes.

But God is different. His happiness is not dependent on immediate circumstances. He is not conditioned by what is happening right now, but in the perfection of his character and His eternal goodness God is perpetually happy. Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher from colonial America wrote:

The whole of God’s internal good or glory is in these three things, his infinite knowledge, his infinite virtue or holiness, and his infinite joy and happiness. (quoted in *Happy Church*, p. 9)

In other words: God is all-knowing, He is all-good, and He is all-happy! He’s not just omniscient and omnipotent and omnipresent, He’s also omnicelebrant. He is the happy God!

If that word makes you uncomfortable, however, we can use the more theological term of joy. **Nehemiah 8:10** says this:

**10**Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

This is one of those verses that often get quoted on refrigerator magnets and Pinterest boards without a lot of context. The joy of the Lord is your strength. It’s also the name of a pretty good campfire song. But what does it mean?

In context, the people of God have just rediscovered God’s Word and law after many years of not paying attention to it. Their inclination is to grieve, to feel bad, to repent for all the years they have been neglecting God’s word.

But that’s not what God wants. Instead, Nehemiah tells them to celebrate, to have a holiday. They should go home and eat the choicest of food and drink the sweetest of beverages because God is not a grumpy God, but a joyful God.

And that’s the key: it is God’s joy that gives us strength. It is the fact that God is a joyful God that should lead to celebration and joy for God’s people. If He were a grouchy God, if He were grumpy and angry and vengeful, then they would have reason to mourn and weep; for the reading of His law would lead to their destruction. But that’s not what is happening, that’s not what God wants. He is bringing them back to Himself, not pushing them away.

He is a joyful God.

***When the Lost Are Found***Which leads to my second point: **We can affect God’s joy.** Somehow, in the mystery of God’s creation, He has put us in a position where we can add to His joy.

Now, I need to be careful here. I feel like I’m talking about stuff that I don’t completely understand. I believe that God is eternally and perfectly happy. I do not believe that there is any deficit in God. So I don’t want to make it sound like God is needy, like he needs us to bring Him joy or He will somehow be sad. If you imagine God standing alongside the gym wall at a Middle School dance feeling sorry for Himself because no one wants to dance with Him, I don’t think that is an accurate picture of God. God’s joy is always complete.

But, somehow, God has made it so that we can affect His joy. At least, that’s what I get from some of the stories that Jesus tells. Let me show you.

In Luke 15 Jesus tells a series of three stories about lost things. The story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. All three stories involve something being lost, something being found, and a party being thrown. The story of the lost sheep, in particular, is meaningful for our church because the painting that hangs outside our sanctuary depicts the party that is thrown when the shepherd gets the lost lamb home. I’ve talked about that story several times in connection to our mission statement.

But let’s consider, today, the second story. The story of the lost coin. Jesus tells this story in **Luke 15:8-9:**

**8**“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?**9**And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’

In all likelihood, these silver coins were a part of this woman’s dowry—a gift from her father when she married her husband. She would have worn them as ornamental decorations on her headdress at the time of her wedding. They also represented a good portion of her family’s savings. A modern equivalent might be a woman’s engagement ring and wedding band studded with diamonds. You can imagine, if you lost a diamond from your wedding ring, you’d want to find it back.

Houses of the poorer class in the middle east at that time would have been constructed without windows. A few stones might be missing near the ceiling, to allow some air flow; but this opening, together with the door, did not give much light in the house. Even in the middle of the day it was dark in the house. The woman would need to light a candle just to see anything.

Animals were also frequently kept inside rural homes, although in a somewhat separate space from the family dwellings. There would also be a corner of the house devoted to storing goods.

Somewhere in this house, then, the woman has lost her coin. You can imagine her dismay, her anxiety, and worry. She lights her candle and gets a broom and starts searching every corner of the house, under the straw, in the corner among the baskets of grain and drying fish. Every place she might have been gets searched, even places she doesn’t remember going, until, at last, she catches sight of a gleam of metal in a dark corner.

You can imagine her relief, her joy. Searching for the coin is what anyone would have done. It’s not like she lost track of a dime or a quarter—this coin represented one/tenth of everything she and her husband owned. Of course she looked for it.

But what she does next seems a little strange. She calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice, with me; I have found my lost coin.” She throws a party.

I understand the impulse to share her good news. She’s obviously relieved to have the coin back. But throwing a party makes no financial sense. Whatever she’s saved by locating the lost coin she’s now going to spend in entertaining her guests.

And the party seems to be central to the point Jesus is making. **Verse 10:**

 **10**In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

When He tells these stories, Jesus wants us to identify the shepherd and the woman with God. He’s telling us that God searches for lost sinners. That God seeks and saves the lost. But more than that, He wants us to know that God rejoices when people turn back to Him. The joyful God is filled with joy when the lost come home.

And that’s what I mean when I say that we can affect God’s joy. God is eternally and perfectly happy; and yet He also experiences joy when we return to Him. Somehow, mysteriously, we can add to God’s joy.

Jesus says something similar in the parable of the talents. That’s the story about the landowner who goes on a journey and leaves a portion of his fortune with three of his servants. The first two servants take what is given to them and they put it to work, and when the master returns he finds that they have doubled his money. The third servant, however, is scared of losing the master’s money, and so he buries it in a hole. When the master returns, he finds out that his money hasn’t even earned any interest, and he is very displeased with the third servant.

What’s interesting for our purposes today, however, is what the master says to the first two servants. **In Matthew 25:21** (and then again in verse 23) the master says:

**21**“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

Come and share your master’s happiness! The implication is that the good and faithful servants have brought joy to the landowner. They have increased his happiness.

And if you assume that the master in the story represents God (as every interpreter believes) and that the servants are meant to represent us, then it would seem that we can affect God’s joy. When we are faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to us, we bring joy to God. The happy God is made even happier by our faithful service.

***For the Praise of His Glory***Which brings me to my third point: **The purpose of the church is to bring God joy**. The reason the church in the world exists—and the first and most important thing to know about Hope Church in Spencer—is that we are here to bring joy to God. If God has, in some way, made it so that people here on earth can add to His joy, then we want to be doing exactly that.

The key verses here are **Ephesians 1:11-12:**

**11**In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, **12**in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

This thing we call the "church" hasn't happened by accident. This collection of chosen people didn't just spring up out of thin air. The church is a God's idea. This is what He has had in mind all along.

I love the way Paul gets this point across. He heaps up idea after idea, term after term, to illustrate that the church is God's idea.

First, he tells us that we have been predestined. Predestined. That means that if you reached back in time--if you invented some sort of time machine that allowed you to zip back to way before the world was created and there was nothing except God--and you asked God about the church, even then He could have told you about it. He had it in mind even then. He could have told you the names of His different churches around the world and the names of those who would be in them.

Then Paul tells us that the church has been formed according to God's plan. God has a plan. It is almost as though God is an architect here and He is designing this wonderful building. And before He gets started He draws up this plan, a set of blueprints for how it should be. Only we’re not talking about a building, of course, but this collection of people.

Then Paul tells us that God is working His plan out in "conformity with the purpose of his will." Purpose. This is the third term that jumps out to me in this verse. God has a purpose for the church.

It makes sense, doesn't it? If God has gone through all the trouble to design a church and He has chosen people to be in it and He has poured out all these blessings on these people through Jesus Christ, there must be a reason for it all. He must have some sort of purpose in mind, right?

He does.

The explanation of God’s purpose is in verse 12: “that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.”

This is why the church exists. The Church is a collection of people chosen by the will of God for the praise of His glory. To put a smile on God’s face. Or, as we phrased it in our vision statement, to bring joy to Jesus.

I like the way Paul has written this. The church's purpose is to bring praise to God's glory. In other words, our job is to call attention to something that is already there. God is glorious. Our job as the church is to display that fact.

This is an important distinction. It’s similar to the idea that God is perfectly happy, and yet we are able to add to His joy. When we talk about glorifying God we are not talking about giving Him something he does not yet have.

God is already perfect and magnificent and splendid and more glorious than anything imaginable. Our job is not to add to that--there's nothing to add--but to show it. The job of the church is to be a display case for God.

You know, if you had in your possession a costly gem--let's say the Hope Diamond--you would want to show it off. You would set up some lights and get a big room and you would set the diamond in a display case right in the middle of the room so that everyone could see it. You wouldn't need to add anything to it or enhance it in any way, you would just put it out there so everyone could see how beautiful it is. You would honor it by putting it on display.

Well, in the same way, the church is a display case for God--only on a much wider scale. The purpose of the Church is to allow the glories and the perfections of God to be seen by the rest of the world. The purpose of the Church is to be a showcase for the mercy and the love and the faithfulness and truth and the strength and the justice and the kindness and the wisdom of our God. And so on, and so on.

And, especially, we are meant to display the joy of God. A watching world gets its picture of God from what they see in us. We believe God is a joyful God. And so they should see the joy of the Lord in us.

***Zephaniah 3:17***Finally, there’s one more verse I want to bring to your attention. When we talk about the joy of God, one of my favorite verses is **Zephaniah 3:17:**

**17**The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.”

I love this picture of God. We come to church to express our joy in God. We sing, because we want God to know how much we love and adore Him. Sometimes, when we sing as a congregation, I have a picture of God on His throne as the audience for our music.

But this verse paints a different picture. Instead of God as the audience, in this verse it is God who is singing. It is God who is filled with joy; as he sings over us to let us know how much he loves and adores us.

God rejoices over you with singing. That’s why we are here as a church. To Bring joy to Him.