



## Third Sunday of Advent C

December 16, 2018

### ♪ GAUDETE SUNDAY ♪ (*“Let us Rejoice”*) Reflections on Joy

Traditionally, the Third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete Sunday*. On this weekend, we light the rose-colored candle. The priest and deacon are wearing rose-colored vestments. The color rose or pink is a symbol of joy. The first and second readings as well as the psalm have a strong note of joy in them.

The opening verse of today’s first reading exhorts us to shout for joy, to sing joyfully and be glad of heart.

Paul writes from prison and says to us: “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I say again, rejoice.*”

In a homily on Joy, Pope Francis writes:

*Joy is a gift from God. It fills us from within.... Joy cannot be held at heel: it must be let go. Joy is a pilgrim virtue. It is a gift that walks, walks on the path of life that walks with Jesus: preaching, proclaiming Jesus, proclaiming joy, lengthens and widens that path. It is a virtue of the Great, of those Great ones who rise above the little things in life, above human pettiness, of those who will not allow themselves to be dragged into those little things within the community, within the Church: they always look to the horizon. If we keep this joy to ourselves it will make us sick in the end, our hearts will grow old and wrinkled and our faces will no longer transmit that great joy, only nostalgia and melancholy which is not healthy.*

#### **Stop looking for it—Pastoral Reflections on Joy**

I found on the internet this very good reflection on joy written by Pastor Aaron Menikoff. Please share it with others.

*I know I’m supposed to delight in God. I know the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Surely Paul wasn’t kidding when he commanded, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). He meant it. Joy isn’t the leather interior of the Christian life; it’s not optional. Joy is a must, and the stakes are high. A heart that won’t rejoice in Christ doesn’t know him.*

*The Bible is clear: I need to rejoice. I get it. More than that, I want to rejoice.*

*But why is it so hard? I’m often sorrowful, and sometimes for no apparent reason. At times like this the words of God bounce off my heart like rain on a tin roof. I know I’m not alone. Not long ago, I preached a sermon on Psalm 28 called “Wisdom for the Depressed.” David staggered through seasons of terrible depression when God seemed silent and far away. After that sermon, many believers told me about their bouts with depression. They wanted more joy, but struggled to find it. I understand.*

*The battle for joy is uniquely exhausting. It’s not like the fight for other virtues. For example, when I don’t feel love towards my wife, I know there are loving things to be done. I can send an encouraging text, bring home flowers, or wash the dishes. There is nothing hypocritical in this. I know I love my wife, and so I do loving things and wait for my feelings to catch up. Likewise, there are moments when I don’t feel at peace with a friend. This feeling doesn’t keep me from controlling my tongue and using my words to bless instead of curse. In other words, the fight for love and peace can be waged with particular actions.*

*But the fight for joy is different. It’s not clear what doing joyful things looks like. Joyful actions don’t stimulate joyful feelings. Harvard psychologist Amy Cuddy made a name for herself teaching us to “fake it till we make it.” Spend a few minutes with your arms behind your head and your legs up on your desk, she argues, and you’ll feel strong enough to negotiate a higher salary. Maybe. But you can’t muster joy. You can’t fake it. Joy defies manipulation.*

*The presence of joy is a mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We must have it. And not just because it makes Christianity attractive—though it does. And not just because good leaders are joyful leaders—though they are. No, we need joy because it’s precious evidence God means more to us than anything else. What is joy?*

#### **NOT THE ABSENCE OF SADNESS**

*It is not the absence of sorrow. It’s important to start here because too many believers walk in a fog of guilt. They think their sadness is sin. But that’s not necessarily*

true, and to assert joy is the absence of sadness is to trivialize our pain and misread the Bible. Plastering platitudes over our depression is unhelpful and ungodly because it's clear from Scripture that joy and sadness often mix.

The writers of the Psalms never hide their pain:

- “To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me” (Psa 28:1).

- “I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away” (Psa 31:9–10).

“My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’” (Psa 42:3)

Notice the honesty. They don't try to fake it till they make it. And yet, these seasons of grief are always accompanied by reliance on a trustworthy God. In Psalm 28, David may be burdened by the reality God seems deaf to him, yet in his pain he calls God his rock (28:1). When his circumstances nearly crush him, David calls others to trust his faithful God, “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord” (31:24). Though the author of Psalm 42 is deeply dejected and depressed, his faith in God is deeper still, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (42:11). In the songs of Israel we find that sadness and joy are never far apart in the lives of God's people.

For more proof, look no further than Jesus who wept at the tomb of his dear friend, Lazarus (John 11:35). Jesus didn't feign gladness. He didn't start singing, “It Is Well with My Soul.” Jesus wept. And he didn't weep because it was the natural or socially appropriate response. He wept because it was the godly response. The one who always rejoiced in his Father poured out tears for his friend. Joy is not the absence of sadness.

### **NOT THE PRESENCE OF A SMILE**

Neither is joy the presence of shallow optimism. It's easy to look at someone with a big smile and assume he's full of joy. Not necessarily.

President Roosevelt pulled America through the Great Depression by sheer force of will. His charismatic personality filled a room and his lips dripped with cheerfulness. But he didn't feel it deep down. Historians tell us it was smoke and mirrors. Though Roosevelt was quite lonely and somber, he was convinced the nation needed an Optimist-in-Chief. He played the part well. Optimism can be faked. Joy can't.

Of course Christians have profound reasons to be optimistic. We know that in the end, God wins. But as a pastor, I confess there are days when I'm tempted to pretend. I paste a smile on my face when discouragement has saturated my heart. That smile may look like joy, but it isn't—at least not always. The church would be helped with more pastors who are as honest about their suffering as they are God's sufficiency. I want to grow in this.

Whether you're a pastor or not, it's hard to admit you aren't doing well. Optimism can be skin deep; joy is rooted in the heart. When you gather with God's people, don't assume everyone is happy. Yes, the tomb is empty and God's people have come together to rejoice. This will undoubtedly produce many joyous hearts and beaming faces. But behind those grins are often hearts torn up by the sins of the world. The presence of a smile is no guarantee of true joy.

### **WHAT THEN IS JOY?**

Joy is delightful confidence in the Triune God who orchestrated, accomplished, and applied our salvation. God's people respond to his character and his actions joyfully. Joy is an inward affection that finds an outward expression in praise and adoration and song. A God who dwells with his people inspires the psalmist to “sing for joy” (Psa 84:2). A God who has done great things is a God in whom we can “be glad and rejoice” (Joel 2:21). And when the Ethiopian eunuch found salvation in the gospel proclaimed by Philip, he “went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39).

Randy Alcorn, citing the missionary Amy Carmichael, describes joy as “settled happiness.” It's a gift from God that “is ours today because Christ is here; it's ours tomorrow because Christ will be there; and it's ours forever because he will never leave us.”

I agree with Carmichael and Alcorn that joy is “settled happiness,” and it's settled because it's rooted in a life-changing faith that knows our God is wonderful. Optimism fades when the forecast is bleak, but nothing can shake the ground of our joy, because the ground of our joy is a holy, loving, faithful, and immovable God.

One of the best places to see this is in 2 Chronicles 20. The king, Jehoshaphat, was on the brink of an epic battle. A league of nations with an overwhelming military advantage prepared to invade Judah (20:1–3). Under these dire circumstances, Jehoshaphat gathered the whole nation and did the only thing that made sense; he cried out to the Lord. Jehoshaphat prayed honestly in his moment of weakness: “We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do” (20:12).

*Like Jehoshaphat, the depressed feel weak. Even Jesus, when facing the “great horde” of sin and death, wondered if he had the strength necessary to persevere. In a moment of weakness, the Savior prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me” (Luke 22:42). Jesus wanted a different and less painful path than the cross. It is neither unusual nor sinful to experience moments of extreme weakness in the face of the attacking horde. The enemy may be from without—terminal cancer, a lost job. The enemy may be from within—feelings of loneliness or grief. There is wisdom in seeing and confessing your weakness.*

*Jehoshaphat did even more; he ended his prayer with a vote of delightful confidence in a sovereign God. He prayed expectantly, “but our eyes are on you” (2 Chr. 20:12). These simple words convey hope in God. When tempted to keep his eyes on that “great horde,” Jehoshaphat chose to gaze at his great God. Instead of spiraling down into anxiety and fear, he looked up in awe at his faithful and powerful Lord. In a moment of profound depression, Jehoshaphat gladly chose to trust God. That’s joy. His trust proved well-placed. The Lord defeated the invading armies, and Jehoshaphat didn’t even need to lift his sword (20:17).*

*Years later, when a greater king faced an even greater trial, he too prayed with delightful confidence. After asking his Father to allow another way than the cross, Jesus said, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” Jesus gladly chose to trust his Father. That’s joy.*

*If you’ve been redeemed, you know God is trustworthy. You realize your sin is a far greater threat than the horde Jehoshaphat faced. Because of that sin, you deserve God’s hurricane of ferocious wrath. When you were truly hopeless and confused, Jesus stepped in front of this all-consuming storm, he stood in your place, and there he bore God’s wrath for you. This is the confession of every Christian. It’s the reason you know God is faithful. When you gladly choose to trust him, you have joy.*

### **“BUT OUR EYES ARE ON YOU”**

*What do we do during those seasons where we don’t feel joyful? What’s to be done when we know in our head that God is good and kind and sovereign but our joy in God has gone AWOL? The answer may surprise you: Stop looking for joy.*

*Have you ever heard the Greek myth about Tantalus? Zeus labeled him a thief and a traitor and sentenced him to agonizing punishment. Tantalus had to stand under the branches of a tree laden with ripe, delicious fruit while resting in a pool of cool water. Whenever Tantalus tried to pick the fruit, the gods moved the branches out*

*of his reach. And when Tantalus knelt down to drink the refreshing water, the pool always dried up. From this story we gain the verb “tantalize.”*

*Joy is like Tantalus’s fruit and water. You’ll never get it by looking for it. To find joy you have to take an indirect route. Don’t look to joy, look to Christ. Pray like Jehoshaphat, “My eyes are on you, Lord.”*

*Even when Paul commands us to rejoice, he’s fundamentally calling us to place our confidence in who God is and what he’s done. Paul’s command to rejoice comes at the very end of his letter to the Philippians (4:4). This command comes after Paul acknowledged the good work of salvation God began and promised to complete (1:6). It comes after Paul recalled how earthly trials are nothing compared to heavenly hope (1:23). It comes after Paul recounted the high cost Christ paid to save an unholy people (2:8). It comes after Paul proclaimed his identity is not in safety, reputation, or ministry but Christ alone (3:12). It comes after he declared no matter what happens in this life, our citizenship is in heaven (3:20).*

*In all these chapters, Paul’s deliberately placed the eyes of his readers on the trustworthy Savior. And only after doing this, only after pointing to the reality of God as worthy of all our faith, did Paul finally command, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4). It’s as if Paul is saying, “You must rejoice, and if you want to know how, revisit what I’ve just said: put your trust in Christ.”*

*The key to finding joy is to stop looking for it. Keep your eyes on Christ instead. Then watch and wait. Joy will come.*

### **A WORD TO THOSE IN THE PIT**

There’s no silver bullet in the fight for joy because keeping our eyes on Christ isn’t easy. But with God’s help, it’s possible.

Maybe you are in the pit of depression right now. Like Jehoshaphat, you feel hopeless and confused. You want to look to the Lord, but you aren’t sure how. There is hope for you:

- *Focus on Christ.* There is nothing more important than wrapping your mind around who Jesus is and what he’s done. We never, ever graduate out of Gospel 101. You know Jesus is reliable because it says so in his Word. You believe his Word because he saved you. Revisit the beauty, glory, power, and faithfulness of the life-giving Son of God. As so many wise saints have said before, preach the gospel to yourself daily.

- *Surround yourself with people who speak a lot about Jesus.* You will be greatly helped if people in your life

actually talk about Jesus as freely as they talk about the latest ballgame or political intrigue. It's so much easier to keep your eyes on Christ when the people in your life point you his way. Plant yourself in a church where you know you'll be regularly encouraged to look to Jesus.

- *Sing rich psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.* The next time you gather with God's people, take time to reflect upon the words you sing. To the extent these lyrics point the saints to Christ, they will lead the saints to joy.

- *Labor in the Word and in prayer.* Those who skim over Scripture and speed through prayer will catch only glimpses of the Savior. To mine for gold you need a sharp axe and strong arms. To look for Christ you need an open Bible and worn knees.

You were built for joy. This is true. But joy is most likely to be found when you seek Christ, not joy itself.

Happy Gaudete Sunday!

*Le Saran*