

# “Unwrapping Joy”, Week 2 of “What’s It Really About- Unwrapping the True Meaning of Christmas”

Presented By Rev. Kristen Lowe  
at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.

Scripture Inspired by John 15:9-17

Jesus says to us, “The Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You did not choose me but I chose you.

And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.



One of my favorite authors, Max Lucado, writes of a certain King: No man had more reason to be miserable than this one, yet no man was more joyful. His first home was a palace. Servants were at his fingertips. The snap of his fingers changed the course of history. His name was known and loved. He had everything wealth, power, respect. And then he had nothing. Students of the event still ponder it. Historians stumble as they attempt to explain it. How could a king lose everything in one instant? One moment he was royalty; the next he was in poverty. His bed became, at best, a borrowed pallet and usually the hard earth. He never owned even the most basic mode of transportation and was dependent upon handouts for his income. He was sometimes so hungry he would eat raw grain or pick fruit off a tree. He knew what it was like to be rained on, to be cold. He knew what it meant to have no home. His palace grounds had been spotless; now he was exposed to filth. He had never known disease, but was now surrounded by illness. In his kingdom he had been revered; now he was ridiculed. His neighbors tried to lynch him. Some called him a lunatic. His

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family tried to confine him to their house. Those who didn’t ridicule him tried to use him. They wanted favors. They wanted tricks. He was a novelty. They wanted to be seen with him-that is, until being with him was out of fashion. Then they wanted to kill him. He was accused of a crime he never committed. Witnesses were hired to lie. The jury was rigged. No lawyer was assigned to his defense. A judge swayed by politics handed down the death penalty. They killed him. He left as he came, penniless. He was buried in a borrowed grave, his funeral financed by compassionate friends. Though he once had everything, he died with nothing. He should have been miserable. He should have been bitter. He had every right to be a pot of boiling anger. But he wasn’t. He was joyful. Sourpusses don’t attract a following.

In his poverty and humility, People followed him wherever he went. Children scampered after this man. Crowds don’t gather to listen to the woeful. Crowds clamored to hear him. Why? He was joyful. He was joyful when he was poor. He was joyful when he was abandoned. He was joyful when he was betrayed. He was even joyful as he hung on a tool of torture, his hands pierced with six-inch Roman spikes. Jesus embodied a stubborn joy. A joy that refused to bend in the wind of hard times. A joy that held its ground against pain. A joy whose roots extended deep into the bedrock of eternity. This morning, we talk about joy. Just to get you thinking, let me ask: are you a joyful person? Note that I didn’t ask, “Are you happy?” That is different. Most of us instinctively recognize that there is a difference between joy and happiness, yet it is a challenge to put an exact definition on that difference. Lucky for all of us, I got a little help in my email this week. **Joy is buying toys at discount! Guaranteed!**



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### Definition of **JOY**

**1a** : the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what One desires.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary states: “Joy: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires”. I have a friend who sadly, can’t feel joy. For years I’ve heard her say over and over again “You know, I’ll be happy when...” Happy when I get my college education paid off. Happy when I meet Mr. Right. Happy when I get a house out in the country. Happy when I get that promotion. Happy when... Unfortunately she keeps waiting for joy to come to her instead of unwrapping what she already has. And this is the reason I wanted to light the Joy candle on our Advent wreath one week early. I wanted to illustrate to you that we shouldn’t wait for joy. Joy is our gift from God. It’s already waiting for us.



Last week I saw my neighbor putting up his Christmas lights. He was going all out. He had the music going; He had the Santa hats on. He was really into it!

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I love looking out my window to see all his beautiful lights. It’s so festive! Bill’s work outside, making his house look Christmassy, brings joy to neighbors and those driving by. What is so interesting about this is that only a few weeks ago, Bill’s 53 year old wife Judy passed away. Bill told me, “You know, we thought we’d have maybe 3 years and we got 7. We traveled, we did what we wanted to do and we didn’t take one moment for granted. Had we not been dealt this kind of hand, we may not have savored life as perfectly as we did. It was a real gift.” Bill’s joy is not about his happiness.



“... I am going to love each moment that I can be here.

I will find *joy* in the fact that God has given me a way to look at life in such an intimate manner.”

Another young lady in our community has joy. Many of you caroled for Isabelle Dunai last year just after she came home on hospice. Isabelle has more painful days than not. She finds joy in things like being able to attend French class online and getting out to see a movie with her friends. Isabelle is not happy about her diseased body. But she has joy.

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There are some here who work behind the scenes to make this church, a shelter in the storm for wayward souls. A place where we can connect the disconnected, ignite hearts for Jesus Christ and transform lives to transform the world. Because of your work, someone is going to find a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, the kind that produces real joy. I've spoken with people who have not had a relationship with Jesus. And now they do. And I know from spending time with you, that the work that you do produces its own kind of joy. I'm sorry Target, you don't know about joy. I'm sorry Webster, but you missed the boat on this one also. Let's turn to a better source.

John 15:7-11



Just before going to the cross, Jesus took the opportunity to instruct His disciples one last time. They have left the upper room, and are on the way to Gethsemane. In that context, Jesus said this: “Just

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As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” The key verse in that passage for us today is 11: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” What did he tell them? Two things obey, and remain. Those are the two commands Jesus gave in verse 10 – “obey my commands” and “remain in my love.” Why did Jesus give those commands? So that we might have complete joy. The first command is obedience. Obedience results in joy. We sometimes believe the opposite, that God has given us this list of “things not to do” to limit our freedom and make us miserable, but the opposite is true. Obedience to God is the path to joy, not only because obeying the things we are not supposed to do saves us pain and hurt, but also because in the doing of all the things we are supposed to do we find significance and purpose and life. The second command is “remain in my love.”

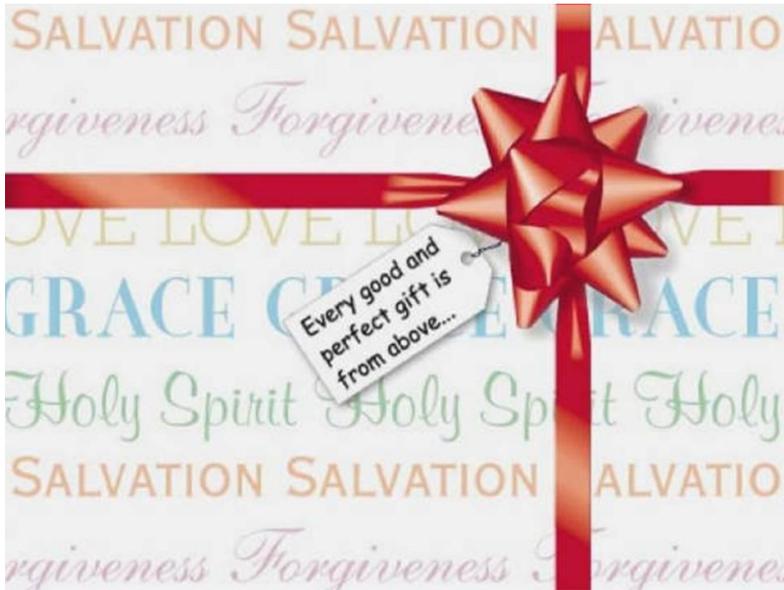
Joy is the experience  
of knowing that you  
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nothing--sickness,  
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distress, oppression,  
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death--can take that  
love away.

-Henri Nouwen

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Henri Nouwen has said, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, depression, war, or even death – can take that love away.” You and I have known that unconditional love of Jesus at moments in the past; Jesus command to us is to remain in that love. To never get sidetracked, to never get persuaded otherwise, to never lose sight of the eternal truth of Christmas: Immanuel, God with Us. When my mom passed away three Christmases ago, a former colleague of mine hugged me and whispered, “Isn’t it wonderful that Jesus is real?” Those words have calmed my weary soul more than once. I remember Pastor Don in that moment and his kind words.

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What gifts are in your life that you have yet to unwrap? You may have noticed that we are out of synch with our Advent candles. The third week in Advent we celebrate joy by lighting the 3<sup>rd</sup> candle. But today I tell to you not postpone joy! “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” Jesus is welcoming us to remain close in His arms, to remain always in the midst of the fact that we are loved perfectly, unconditionally, truly, not by virtue of anything that we have done or failed to do, but solely by the grace of God. As we do, we will know joy. Joy that is not about feeling, circumstance, or economics. Rather, joy that is about being a part of something incredible – the Kingdom of God. About being part of something eternal – the Kingdom of God. About being part of a people, who meet here week after week together in worship and in seeking God. About being part of a mission to share the incredible good news of salvation with a broken and diseased world. My friends, don’t wait to Unwrap Joy.