

“Accept God’s Joy” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
December 16, 2018, Second Sunday of Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

I just could not resist starting this message with these words by Jacob Myers (Working Preacher.org, December 16, 2012) for he captures the essence of Paul’s letter to the Philippians – for me a cinnamon roll lover.

He writes: “Cinnamon rolls are one of my favorite desserts.

“I’m not talking about those out-of-the-can jobs we feed our children before we race out the door to make it to Sunday school in time. I’m talking about those delectable works of art you can only purchase at a bakery.

“There’s something heavenly about the way the cream cheese frosting seeps down into the sugary, cinnamon-y crevices to produce that perfect blend of spice, tang, and sweetness; it brings a “hallelujah” to my taste buds.

“There’s no wrong way to eat a cinnamon roll, but for my money there is a right way to eat one. Cinnamon rolls are made to be unfurled. You didn’t buy a cinnamon doughnut or a cinnamon cake -- you bought a roll, so unroll it! When you start at the outside and slowly, lovingly work your way to that inner sanctum, that succulent holy-of-holies that is the center of the cinnamon roll it feels like Jesus has finally returned and decided to throw a party in your mouth. Okay, maybe that’s a bit much; but you cannot deny that the best bite of a cinnamon roll is without doubt that culminating center bite.”

Why do I mention cinnamon rolls and Philippians in the same breath? What do cinnamon rolls have to do with Philippians 4:4-7? Paul has given us in this text, the center bite of the Philippian cinnamon roll, the best of the best. Now, not everyone agrees that the center of the cinnamon rolls is the best, but most of us can relate to the joy of eating a cinnamon roll and most of us can relate to this uplifting scripture I just read on this third Sunday of Advent, Joy Sunday. **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**

Joy, rejoice, words we hear and read in many places this time of year. Advertisements mention the joy of the season. Christmas songs you hear mention rejoicing and joy. You cannot walk into a store decorated for Christmas and not see the word joy. Likewise, many website that are decorated for Christmas highlight the word joy. ‘Buy our products and receive joy’ is the underlying theme. Of the few cards we’ve received this early, many of the greetings mention joy and rejoicing: Wishing you joy this Christmas. May we all rejoice in celebration for the greatest gift of all.. Jesus Christ. Wishing you all the joys of the season. May your Christmas be blessed by His everlasting joy.

The aspect of joy that Paul is addressing is God's everlasting joy. But before I get to that. There are those folks who aren't joyful at Christmas for a variety of reasons. When I say they are not joyful, I mean they are not joyful in the fleeting sense of joy, the impermanence of the holiday joy we hear so much about. They may share Paul's understanding of joy, just not society's understanding of joy. That's why we have the Blue Christmas service that we just had last evening.

Paul is not talking about fleeting joy, commercial joy, but joy that has an enduring impact. Joy that will continue, joy that surprises. Everlasting joy. I like that kind of joy – we all do. It is a gift from God. Joy is the echo of God's life in us. The joy that Paul is talking about is a joy that sustains us even when we are worn down by life's challenges. Most scholars believe that Paul was imprisoned when he wrote these words. He was telling the Philippians to rejoice while he was in the dark cell of a Roman prison. Paul was a living example of the joy he writes about.

Paul isn't telling us that there's nothing to worry about or what we worry about is a waste of time. Paul is saying that our fears and concerns need to be placed in the context of our relationship to God. The joy that Paul talks about is rooted in our ongoing relationship with God. And not only our relationship with God, but also our relationship with our community, with each other, for rejoicing is nurtured through mutual support. This doesn't mean everyone needs to agree or always get along, but rather each of us has a role to play in creating the supportive relationships that are the foundation of joy and a cause for rejoicing.

There's another movie version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* out now that provides an example of this community support of joy. When the Grinch thought that he had ruined Christmas for Whoville, the village didn't seem troubled. They offered each other mutual support even though their Christmas presents, decorations and food had been stolen by Grinch. They gathered in the village square and sang about Christmas joy, and not about the things they thought they needed to celebrate Christmas. Those in Whoville had joy in their hearts.

The joy that the residents of Whoville and Paul are talking about can't be purchased at the mall. It is not something that one can pursue. You cannot capture joy anymore than you can capture the wind. However, we live in America where one of our rights is 'the pursuit of happiness' which leads us to believe we can pursue joy, we can capture it. But God's joy is not like that.

Pastor and author Rick Warren provides an example of God's joy and how we react to it. "My mother loved to cook for me. Even after I married Kay, when we would visit my parents, Mom prepared incredible home-cooked feasts. One of her great pleasures in life was watching us kids eat and enjoy what she prepared. The more we enjoyed eating it, the more enjoyment it gave her.

But we also enjoyed pleasing Mom by expressing our enjoyment of her meal. It worked both ways. As I would eat the great meal, I would rave about it and praise my mother. I intended not only to enjoy the food but to please my mother. Everyone was happy.”

Our relationship with God works both ways too. We enjoy what God has done for us, and when we express that enjoyment to God, it brings God joy -- but it also increases our joy. (Rick Warren, "God smiles when we praise," Pastor Rick's Daily Hope Website, rickwarren.org, May 21, 2014. Retrieved June 27, 2016.)

I believe that Rick Warren's story is an example of what Paul writes in Verse 5: **Let your gentleness be known to everyone.** The Living Bible translates this verse: **Let everyone see that you are unselfish and considerate in all you do.** By living a life of consideration for others as Jesus did, by offering who we are, as Jesus did, and what we have, as Jesus did, we as individuals and as a community can let our gentleness be known to everyone as we rejoice in the Lord always. By offering this mutual support, we are doing God's will. We can live a life of joy and individually and together share that life with all of God's creation.

Cinnamon rolls do have a sweet, delicious center. For some, that center is the best of the best. But for Paul, the center that's the best of the best – God's joy – is described in today's scripture reading from Philippians. God's joy is the sweet center of our Christian faith.

This Christmas take time to slow down and enjoy the people around you. This Christmas share God's joy with others and work together with others to spread God's joy – as we are doing today with the food distribution.

Let me close with a quote from writer Brian McLaren: “God is joyful, and God's joy is contagious. When we tap into the joy of the Lord, when we step into the pure joy that burns like a billion galaxies in the heart of God, we'll soon find ourselves shouting, dancing, singing, leaping, clapping, swaying, laughing and otherwise jubilating and celebrating.” (Brian D. McLaren, Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in Twelve Simple Words, (HarperOne, 2011), Chapter 8.)

May this Christmas find you shouting, dancing, singing, leaping, clapping, swaying, laughing and otherwise jubilating and celebrating God's joy!