

JOY TO THE WORLD

Rev. Richard Maraj

Sunday, Dec. 22, 2024

All right, this morning we are talking about “Joy to the World.” So let me ask you: What brings you joy at Christmas? What are some of your favorite things that you enjoy most during the holiday season? Is it the joy of giving? Is it the joy of receiving ... especially when you get what you want? [Congregants laugh] Is it the joy of watching the excitement of kids at this time of year, especially opening their presents? Is it the joy of putting up beautiful decorations? Is it the joy of singing Christmas carols? Or watching Christmas movies? Or eating goodies? Or going to parties?

For me, some of the things that I really enjoyed that brought me joy at Christmas was how festive our house looked, felt and smelled. You know, I love how it looked, because we had decorations everywhere and we had garland and mistletoe and tinsel. Do they even have tinsel and mistletoe anymore? I don't know if they do, but we had it, and it was hard not to feel joyful and festive.

Something else that made us feel joyful and festive is: we had incredible numbers of boxes of chocolates [congregants laugh] and tins of Danish butter cookies -- European cookies. We would buy ourselves a lot of chocolates, especially boxes of Turtles and a sort of chocolate. Remember maraschino cherries? [Congregants murmur] That was so nasty! [Congregants laugh] But we loved them! We ate them. And these tins of biscuits! I mean, it was incredible. How could you not feel festive and joyful in a house full of cookies and chocolates?

And then finally, it was the *smell* of Christmas that I love. The smell of the pine tree. The smell of my mom baking fruitcake. And on Christmas Eve, my mom did baking from the early morning 'til at night. She baked homemade bread that smelled so good, and ham that was so, so good. Three or four hours it took for that ham. So that smell just lingered and lasted a long time.

That evening, the ones that weren't living at home would come over for Christmas and spend the night. We'd go to candle lighting service, come home, and then start eating ... and drinking. It was truly a joy-filled experience for me, and for us.

Joy is an important part of the celebration of Christmas. But it is more than just the fun, favorite things that we enjoy and the activities that we do. The true joy of Christmas is a deeper and a more lasting joy. In the Book of Luke, Chapter 2, Verse 10, the angels say to the shepherds, *“Do not be afraid, for see: I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

You know, Jesus said that, *“I came, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

Joy is an important part of Christmas, and it is also an important part of our spiritual nature, our spiritual journey and our spiritual purpose. We are here to achieve and live with complete joy, as Jesus said. The Bible directs us towards living a life of joy. It says, *“Enter into the presence of the Lord with joy.” “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.” “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice.”* And to rejoice means to express joy. *“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*

You know, Christian leader Sam Shoemaker once said that the surest way to identify a Christian is not through faith; it is not even through love. It is through *joy*. To be filled with the Spirit of God, to be filled with that Christ's presence, and to live our lives and the awareness of that in all that we do: that that is true joy. That is the ultimate joy. That is complete joy.

You know the hymn, “Joy to the World,” was written in 1719 by the English minister, Issac Watts. He was inspired by two things. One was Psalm 98 that says, *“Shout to the Lord in joy.”*

And the second one, interestingly, was about the Second Coming. *"Joy to the world; the Lord is come"* was not about Jesus' birth; it was about the Second Coming. Interestingly, metaphysically, Unity says the Second Coming does not refer to the literal return of Jesus but coming to the revelation of the consciousness of the Christ individually and for all of us.

Celebrating the birth of the Christ Child every year is wonderful, but it is not enough to bring the fullness of joy and the completeness of joy that Jesus spoke about. The good news of great joy, yes, was the birth, but it is also: How are we living our joy now? You know, how are we bringing joy to the world today and every day?

And the important message to me about this is that we all play a role in bringing joy to the world -- by bringing joy and being called to express joy in ourselves; in our relationships; in our communities; in our families; in our work; in our church; our country; and our world.

To bring more joy into the world, one of the things we need to realize is: joy is not just a feeling or an emotional reaction to conditions; that joy is a choice. Sometimes we think that happiness and joy are just feelings that come when things go well for us; when we get what we want; when things work out in our favor. You know, we think that joy -- having a joyful life -- is having an easy life. You know, having a life where we have no problems; where we have no issues; that we have a perfect job and a perfect relationship.

But the truth is: that is not joy and that is not how life works. But we still try to make things go our own way, sometimes forcing them to go our way, thinking that's going to make us happy. Kind of reminds me of the little boy who jumps on Santa's lap and gives Santa a present. Santa says, *"You got me a present?"*

And the little boy said, *"Yes; it is a hearing aid ..."* [Congregants laugh] ... *"because obviously you didn't hear me last year."* [Congregants laugh]

So, sometimes we try to force things to happen to make us feel joy. Because sometimes we believe that joy is fleeting. It's like a distant cousin who comes to the family reunion, makes some small talk, and is gone before you know it. And we think that joy comes rarely, and it usually does not stay very often.

But joy is not a feeling, it is a decision. Joy is a daily choice that we make regardless of what happens in our lives. Abraham Lincoln once said, *"Most people are as happy as they make up their minds to be."* And I would say we are all as joyful as we make up our minds to be; as we choose to be.

So how joyful are you choosing to be in your life? How joyful are you choosing to be at this Christmas time? You know, we are as positive as we choose to be. So how positive are you choosing to be? You know, we all choose to be as unhappy as we want to be; as grumpy as we want to be; as negative as we choose to be. And we are also as enthusiastic and playful and kind and resilient and determined and passionate as we choose to be.

So how are you choosing to be in your life? And I truly believe that we are the product of all of our choices; that all of our choices have gotten us to where we are today. And it is our choices that will move our lives forward and have that impact. You know, are you making the best choices for your life? And what are some other choices that could be better to bring you closer to a more joyful life; a more complete level of joy?

So this morning I want to talk about three choices we can make to bring more joy to the world.

And the first one is to **CHOOSE TO CONNECT**. The Book of James has an interesting phrase that I find that's very, very interesting in this passage. It says, *"Count it all joy, brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds."*

Count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds. And it's like, "*Count it joy? What are you, nuts?*" [Congregants laugh] Count it all joy ...

But here's the wisdom of that Scripture. What it is saying: this message is calling us to connect with a higher level of consciousness beyond the appearance of whatever we're going through right now. It is calling and asking all of us to step up to a higher level of spiritual maturity, where we are aware that the things that are before us in our lives are a gift and that we have the joy of being alive and having the capacity to learn, to grow, to change, to transform. To rise above these things and to be able to see the good and the lessons that life is trying to teach us and to show us. It is to connect with that awareness and that maturity to know that we should not be shaken by these temporary challenges and difficulties that stop us from feeling that complete joy within us.

And the best way to choose joy and to experience complete joy is to choose to connect with the source of all joy. In Psalm 16, Verse 11, it says, "*In God's presence is the fullness of joy.*" In Nehemiah 8:10, it says, "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*" The best way to experience joy is to connect with the Source; to tune in; to spend time; to immerse ourselves in the fullness of God. To unify ourselves with the source of all joy.

Paramahansa Yogananda of the Self-Realization Fellowship wrote this prayer. He said, "*Teach me to crave the supreme lasting joy of Thy presence in preference to the passing sense pleasures.*" And so what he is saying in this: he is praying, "God help me to seek You, the true sense of joy, rather than keep chasing these things on the outside ... of money or material possession or power, status. Help me to go right to the very Source that makes all joy possible."

Jesus put it this way. He said, "*Seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.*" Choose to seek God first. Choose to connect with the Source of true joy.

You know, C.S. Lewis said, "*I pray because I can't help myself.*" You know, he is saying that his soul is so yearning to know this fullness and connection with God that he cannot stop himself from praying -- from engaging in that incredible activity of unifying with God that is so joyful; that is fulfilling; that is so meaningful and enriching to us. And he is saying: he will not deny himself that blessing; that he will give himself the opportunity at any and every time to connect with the Source of true joy. You know, realizing that joy is a choice and choosing to connect with the Source of all joy is the first way to bring joy to the world.

The second one is to **CHOOSE TO PREPARE YOUR HEART.** I love in the song where it says, "*Let every heart prepare him room.*" Let every heart prepare him room. That says a lot to me about what it takes to bring joy to our lives and the world: it is by preparing our hearts.

How many people have ever heard the studies that say that our hearts are intelligent? Our hearts are intelligent? Heart intelligence, anybody? It says that the heart can learn; the heart can remember; the heart can sense; the heart can feel. The heart has an intelligence; the heart has wisdom.

And they say it is more powerful than the mind! That the heart generates the largest rhythmic electromagnetic field that is 5,000 times stronger than the mind! That the heart is powerful; the heart knows.

In William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the line says, "*Go to your bosom, knock there, and ask the heart what it doth know.*" I think everyone knows: your heart knows. That's why we have phrases like, "*Listen to your heart.*" "*Trust your heart.*" "*Follow your heart.*"

The Bible says how powerful our heart is. In the Book of Jeremiah it says, "*If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.*"

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord that God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. With all your heart.

Have you ever had a closed heart? Anybody ever have -- you don't have to admit this here -- [congregants laugh] but let's just ... Anybody ever have a heavy heart? Anybody ever have a cold heart? Apparently just me. [Congregants laugh] And so, um ...

And I would suggest that every one of us knows that there's a huge difference between an open heart and a closed heart. That there is a huge difference between a warm heart and a cold heart. A grateful heart and an ungrateful heart. A sad heart and a happy heart. Being heavy-hearted and being light-hearted.

I want you to check in right now. Everybody close your eyes; take a deep breath. And just take a deep breath and just go to your heart. And ask, just being honest with yourself, do you have a heavy heart in any area of your life? Or are you hurting in any area? Are you holding on to any pain from the past or any negativity or any grudge?

I want you to take another deep breath, and I want to go to your heart. I want you to take a deep breath into your heart space and just open your heart. Again, take another deep breath and open your heart to the love of God. Another deep breath; open your heart to the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding. One more time: deep breath, and just feel your heart just open wide to the goodness and the beauty and the love of God and the goodness and beauty and the love of life. Deep breath again. And open your eyes now. Anybody feel your heart a little more open than it was before?

In the Book of Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 23 and 24, it has this line. It says, "*Before you leave your gift at the altar, go and reconcile.*" And that is saying that, before you pray to God -- before you worship God, before you connect and feel a sense of oneness with God -- if there is some negativity or energy between you and someone, reconcile that first. That you cannot feel a sense of oneness to God if your heart is blocked; if your heart is angry; if your heart is hurting.

To me, one of the most powerful prayers is from Psalm 51, Verse 10. And it says, "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew within me the right spirit.*" Create in me a clean heart, O Lord. Everyone needs to ask ourselves: Is there anyone I need to forgive? Is there something that I'm resisting? Is there something negative from my past that I'm still holding on to? Towards someone else or even towards myself? And pray the prayer, "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord.*"

Psalm 10:17 says, "*The Lord prepares the hearts of the humble.*" The Lord prepares the hearts of the humble. "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord*" happens when you have a willing heart; an open heart. When your heart is willing to forgive; when your heart is willing to let go. And the more we do that, then we begin to have an open heart; a peaceful heart; a grateful heart; and a joyful heart.

"*Let every heart prepare him room.*" That we cannot experience or express joy unless our heart is open; unless our heart is clean; unless our heart is pure.

The third thing to choose to bring more joy to the world is to **CHOOSE TO SHARE KINDNESS AND CONSIDERATION**. You know, one of the most fundamental things for children and human beings -- for our development mentally, emotionally, spiritually and socially -- is to learn how to share. To share our toys; to share our cookies; to share our blankie. [Congregants laugh] From childhood to adulthood, strangers to loved ones -sharing in all its variations, from sharing food, to sharing knowledge, to sharing ideas, to sharing interests, to sharing time -- enriches us and enriches those that we share with.

You know, sharing fosters caring and consideration and kindness and community and connection and teamwork and openness. It makes us feel valued. It makes us feel supported and encouraged. And it allows for growth and innovation and relationship building. Sharing increases our joy.

Sharing is more than just an action. It is a consciousness. It is a state of being centered in compassion, consideration and care.

Listen to the words of Albert Schweitzer. He said, *"The only way to live a truly joyful life is in the awareness that the happiness of others is as important as the happiness of ourselves."* When we embrace the well-being of others as an integral part to our own well-being, we recognize that true joy can only be found when it's shared. Happiness that is not shared is only half enjoyed.

The joy of sharing has a ripple effect. Studies have been done that show that when someone does some act of kindness for someone else -- helps someone else -- that it increases their level of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that helps us feel good. And that the person being helped, their serotonin goes up. But what's really interesting is that someone even observing someone doing something kind for someone else, their serotonin level increases, as well.

To me, sharing increases and circulates the flow of love, of good, of connection and joy.

So Friday I went to Fry's, because I wanted to buy a flower for a friend. As I went to the flower area, I wanted to pay the flower area because my car was closer to the flower area to find out that's not where I pay. I've got to walk all the way across -- farther than I wanted to. But I made sure as I was walking across to the cashier that I went -- I did not do self-checkout; I don't like that. I like people interaction. So was going to walk to ... and so I walked to like Aisle 15 or whatever it was.

And this lady, she had tons of stuff. In fact, the person ahead of her was just finishing up, so she hadn't even started with hers. So I'm just standing back there, and I'm just smiling. And she smiled, and she said, *"Hey, you only have one flower. Why don't you go ahead of me?"*

I said, *"Nah; you were here first. It's no problem. I don't mind waiting."*

She said, *"No, no, no!"* So she backs up her cart, which -- those aisles are tight! And she gets out of the way and said, *"Please, go ahead."*

And I said, *"Well, that's really, really sweet of you."*

And then she said, *"Aren't we here to just share the joy of God?"* [Congregants laugh]

I'm thinking, *"What?!?!? Did you know what I was talking about on Sunday?!?!?"* [Congregants laugh]

And so anyway, I'm astounded! So, I go up to where the cashier is and the little credit card and paying. And there's a mom and her son just finishing up. Well, the little boy obviously didn't know that they sell flowers at Fry's. And so he sees me hand my flower to the cashier and he says, *"Mom, that man gave that woman a flower, that lady a flower."* [Congregants laugh]

And so I turned and I said, *"Yeah, and I don't even know her."* [Congregants laugh]

So the cashier, the mom, and the lady, you know, and I just have a little chuckle. And then the lady who let me in then said to the cashier, *"Hey, put his flower on my bill."* [Congregants murmur]

And the first words that want to come out of my mouth are like, *"Oh, you really shouldn't"* or *"You don't have to do that"* ... but then I remembered a talk I did a few weeks ago ... [congregants laugh] And I turned to her and I said, *"Thank you; I appreciate that!"* And I said, *"That was very, very sweet of you."*

So we had a nice little moment: the four of us, or five of us. And it was so cool. And then it was time to go, and so they were, *"Merry Christmas; have a wonderful Christmas holiday!"* And the energy was so

incredible; it was absolutely astounding. My already-very-good day got even better! And so it brought an incredible level of joy to us.

And think about it for a second. Such a simple act of kindness and the ripple of joy that it spread. You know, sometimes we think making a difference in the world, you know, is like you got to find a cure to cancer or some kind of all these things. And it is so much simpler! Sometimes a smile; sometimes an encouraging word; sometimes a compliment; sometimes just acknowledging someone; sometimes offering some advice or guidance. It is amazing the simple ways that can touch our lives and make such a difference.

I bet you every one of us could probably stop now and think of something someone did that was really kind that touched us and made a difference; that brought us a little bit of joy. And I bet everyone has probably done things that have brought other people joy. Some simple act of kindness. A simple act of sharing your kindness and consideration for another human being.

You know, one of the individuals that I really admire was George Bernard Shaw. You know, he wrote *Pygmalion*, you remember? And it was converted into a play called *My Fair Lady*. He died at the age of 94 after injury sustained from falling off a ladder while trying to prune his apple tree.

And he wrote a lot of quotes, which I find that, you know, he was living fully right to the end; very inspiring. Here are two quotes that I love that he did. He said, *"The people who get on in this world are people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, they make them."* And then the other one is, *"Some people look at life the way it is and ask why. I look at life the way it could be, and I ask why not."* And so, he demonstrates an incredible consciousness of being alive.

And here are the words I want to get to about joy, true joy. He says, *"This is the true joy in life: being used for a purpose recognized by ourselves as a mighty one. Being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish, little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I get hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."*

And to me, that message is saying: every one of our lives has purpose. Every one of our lives has meaning. Every one of our lives absolutely makes a difference.

I am a radiating center of joy.

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a radiating center of joy."*

I bring joy to the world every day.

[With congregants:] *"I bring joy to the world every day."*

We are here for more than ourselves.

[Congregants:] *"We are here for more than ourselves."*

I didn't want you to say that ... but I love, love, love your enthusiasm. [Congregants laugh]

We are here for one another: to love one another; to support each other; encourage one another; and make this a better world. And the way we do that is to choose to connect with the Source of joy within. to choose to prepare our hearts -- to open our hearts and to have a pure and clean heart. To be a greater channel for the love of God. And, finally, to choose to share our kindness and consideration to others, because we are here to make a difference.

And that is the message in “Joy to the World.” God bless you all! Merry Christmas, everybody!

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