

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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THIS IS THE DAY

A number of years ago, on a balmy April day, a day when the snow was melting, and the sun was shining, I was walking to the church in a bit of a funk. Truth be told, I was in a particularly foul mood that day. My mind was preoccupied with figuring out a no-win situation. As I rounded the corner, I saw a member of the church walking towards me on the other side of the street. As they got closer and when they had recognized me, they shouted out at the top of their lungs:

“This is the day that the Lord has made.”

And almost like a muscle memory, I responded:

“Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

My reaction caught me off guard, my response certainly didn't reflect how I felt, and yet it, was my instant response. I didn't have a chance to think before the words were out of my mouth. And my response caused me to literally stop in my tracks. I stopped and considered both the day and world around me, how I felt and realized that I needed to change my attitude and in a hurry, because that day was a day that God had made, and I needed to be glad in that.

That brief interaction on the street taught me a very valuable lesson. That no matter what mood or attitude I am in, that each day is a day that God has made, and our response to such days is to rejoice and be glad in it, but let's be honest with ourselves, sometimes we don't feel like it. Not every day feels like a day that we should be glad for.

TODAY

I've thought of that moment a few times over this last year. Sadly, I haven't had anyone in passing cars declare the goodness of each day to me, rather, I've been reminded either by a horn honk, a hand gesture, or some other expression of the exact opposite. There's been a growing angst and frustration in people. And that's no surprise to me, after a year and a half of stress and pressure from an ongoing pandemic, one that seems to be mitigated by inconsistent public health measures, people are starting to get to the end of their ropes. When I was working from home, Ev and I noticed that very quickly we could start talking about all the woes, and decided to implement a 'one good thing' at the end of our daily check in's. We needed something to break the cycle of desolation and needed to find some consolations. It's been a challenge over the last year to notice where God's goodness is all around us. It's there, but it's been difficult to notice with so many other things demanding our energy and attention. One does have to be a bit deliberate about finding it.

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Over the next 6 weeks we're going to be exploring the Fruits of the Spirit, and were going to do so with two things in mind. The first is a challenge, I'm going to be encouraging us to stretch

our grey matter and our imaginations to recall and notice where particular Fruits of the Spirit have been and are present to us in daily life. The second is challenging us to imagine how we might share these Fruits of the Spirit with the world. It's my opinion that the Fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity and self-control, are all things that are both in short order at this moment in time and particular things that the Church can be a witness to for a watching world. In some ways, for the Church to be prophetic it's important for us to model how the world could be, to present an alternative way of living. I'd love it if the church could get headlines for how we're embodying these Fruits of the Spirit, rather than ones where we hear of the Church behaving badly.

To help us explore these fruits we've paired them with scripture stories, some we've heard before, others may be unfamiliar to us, but in each, we see one (or two) of these Fruits embodied either by Jesus or by God's people.

To begin with, we are invited to a party. Not just any party but a Wedding!

The fruits of Love and Joy are often found at weddings. Love and Joy are not just reserved for those marrying, it can also be for the families, friends, and communities of the betrothed. I recall my wedding and the feelings of love and joy, the celebration that surrounded the whole day. To put it simply, there was an atmosphere of love and joy present, it was just something that you would breathe in. I can only hope and imagine that Annora and Kwaku can express similar sentiments from their wedding day a few weeks ago.

WEDDING AT CANA

Today we encounter Jesus at a wedding, and we join the story in the middle. We don't know who's marrying, we don't know when it started, we don't know anything about the ceremony, and our gospel writer isn't concerned about those details, what they're concerned about is that Jesus, his disciples, and his mother are present. We don't know how long the celebration has been going on for, all we know is that wedding has been going on long enough that the wine has, or is, running out, and the host is at risk of being embarrassed for not providing enough wine. Compelled by his mother, Jesus performs his first miracle in the Gospel of John and transforms nearby water into wine. By doing so Jesus extends the celebration, much to the relief of the host.

But this isn't the point of the miracles. Yes, it does extend the celebration, joy and love abound and presumably the wedding couple live happily ever after. However, it's my belief that Jesus' miracles aren't performed to solve an immediate problem or resolve a crisis, rather, I believe that Jesus' miracles are always about pointing towards God, and telling people what the Kingdom of God is like. The question for me when encountering a miracle is: what does this miracle tell us about God and the Kingdom of God? I believe it tells us a few things.

First, God loves to celebrate. Psalms describe great feasts filled with joy. Jesus himself was accused more than once of being a glutton and a drunkard for the many feasts that he participated in. In parables where the lost are found, there is always an accompanying celebration, and central to many of these celebrations is an expression of joy. Of unbridled, unabashed, exuberant, unrestrained joy! How often have we felt that? The wedding celebration at Cana, is just one of many instances in scripture of God enjoying and encouraging celebrations of joy and love!

Second, I think it also speaks to an underlying thread of this sermon series, and that is of God's abundance. The wine that's made isn't just ordinary wine, it's the good stuff. It's the stuff that's usually served first when trying to make a good impression, it's the stuff served while the guests still have their wits about them, and are still a bit discerning, but it's not just that Jesus made the best wine, it's the volume of it. There is also lots of it. The vessels that contained the water that was turned to wine were roughly 20-30 gallons EACH! Quick math tells me we're looking at almost 180 gallons of good wine! I'll leave you to do your own math from here, but the point is, that's abundance. The Psalms speak of abundance from God, of tasty feasts, but not just a full feast, abundant feasts, with rich finger licking decadent food. Feasts filled with laughter and joy surrounding God's table.

It's these two qualities that I think are important for us to remember. These are the takeaways for me this week. That as we think about the Fruits of Love and Joy that we remember that God is a God of celebrations, and God loves abundant celebrations.

So, where is it? Where are we finding love and joy in our lives today? There's the question isn't it. For some of us this is a task which we can easily start listing things. I bet before I'm done some people have a list made. However, for others, it may be a struggle to find one good thing. And I get it. The last while has been tough on all of us in one way or another. Somedays it's easier to find joyous things, somedays noticing God's abundant love seems elusive. No one is immune, I've had to work at it from time to time, and I've found that there's always something.

And I think this is also where the Wedding at Cana can speak into our experience, because at Cana at least, God's abundance is unexpected. Only Mary and Jesus are in on what's happened. And I suspect that's sometimes what it's like, sometimes we're as C.S. Lewis wrote we're 'Surprised by Joy'

YFBC - ASN CAMP - Donny & Gweyn

During my first summer in Rosthern I was invited to be camp pastor at one of our local camps. I knew and anticipated having it be a challenge, because it wasn't a camp for children or teenagers, rather, it was a camp for adults with special needs. All the campers were functioning at different levels of independence. Many were born with Downs Syndrome, others had physical disabilities, and others had mental disabilities. Over the week it was my job to speak during the daily chapel times, and generally be present to the campers. So I told stories and I joined in some of the activities. I was beginning to get the feeling that something special was taking place at the camp.

On the last evening of camp. The campers were to have a hot dog roast. I had gone out to the fire earlier, to gather my thoughts for the evening's chapel, and was enjoying a moment of quiet, Adults with Special Needs camp, like most camps, is not very quiet, that's when I noticed Donny walking towards the fire. Donny was one of the campers with Downs Syndrome, he had the typical coke bottle type glasses, and was a little shorter, and stout. He tended to waddle more than walk, and he had the most contagious smile about him. It was one of those big toothily, ear-to-ear type smiles. Donny was walking over to the fire with that big toothy grin, holding ever so gently in his hand a little, white, wild flower. Donny didn't speak very much, he tended to communicate a lot through hand gestures, and he was trying to tell me something.

<**POINT**>

I sensed that he was looking for affirmation, something that I had no hesitation to share.

Another camper, Gweyn, had also joined me at the fire, and planted herself firmly on another log. Gweyn, I suspect, had some sort of cerebral palsy, she walked with a bit of a limp and, like Donny, couldn't talk very much. As I sat there waiting for the other campers to gather, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, that Gweyn had put her hands over her face. I, perhaps naively, assumed that the fire was a little too hot and she was covering her face. Donny, however, had a different idea. He had snuck around behind me, I didn't even see him do it, and I wasn't even aware that he was there until I saw his hand come out of nowhere and tap Gweyn on the shoulder. Ever so gently Gweyn put her hands down and looked at Donny, who, ever so slowly and gently pointed at the flower, and then to Gweyn.

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After repeating this a couple of times, Gweyn in turn pointed to the flower, then to herself, and repeated this a couple of times. With a nod from Donny, Gweyn gently took the flower between her thumb and index finger, and with a sheepish smile, and a look out of the corner of her eye, you could see that something had changed. Donny's smile grew bigger, and he walked off to sit around the campfire.

God's abundant love and joy are all around us, happening perhaps, in the most unassuming places, with the most unassuming people. Even if we don't notice it, even if we're not necessarily participating in it, God is still at unleashing joy and love into our world. Should we choose to change our gaze, shift our attitudes a little, we may very well catch these moments of abundant love and joy. Had I not been paying attention, had I been too carried away or consumed with my own thoughts I may very well have missed the moment of love and joy shared between two beautiful people there at camp.

ENCOURAGEMENT & CHALLENGE

A little over a year ago, as a part of the start of MC Alberta's E3 project we were asked to pick up practices, one of those that was offered and one that many choose to try and practice was a Gratitude journal. Essentially a journal noticing and recognizing happy things that happen throughout the day, week, month, or year. I'm curious, how many of those gratitude journals are still being written today? For those who picked up and are following through with this you're one step ahead of everyone else, because I want to both encourage and challenge you each week as a part of this series.

The first part is the encouragement. The encouragement for this week is quite simply this: God's love is everywhere. Even when it may seem to not be there. Even if we can't notice it, we can trust that God's love is there. I think of the hymn, "Over my head" and can quickly change the last line from "There must be a God somewhere" to "There must be God's love somewhere." We have seen some big examples of love and joy recently, weddings, baptisms, camp, new births, but there are also some littler ones, gardens that grow, jam deliveries, carollers at Christmas, maybe even the satisfaction of doing something with your own hands (I'm thinking of fellow bread bakers here).

The second part is the challenge, and this is the part I haven't talked a lot about because I think it's better for you to come up with your own answer. The challenge this week that is not just to try and notice God's love and joy, but also to share it. Because this is the point here, if we just stop and notice and keep God's love and joy to ourselves then how are we witnessing

to the world? No it needs to be shared. Sure it may feel forced in the beginning, but I wonder how it will shape and change not just us but those we encounter.

And so I wonder about how we can share some of this 'hidden' joy and love which God so abundantly pours out on all of creation. How can we remind those around us, that Love and Joy are present and continue to be even in the face of an ongoing pandemic?

WRAP UP

The Fruits of the Spirit are what is present in our lives for the world to see because of us living and walking the Jesus way. They are meant to be noticed, seen and shared. Jesus shows us at the Wedding in Cana, how God loves celebrations, how the Kingdom of God are filled with abundance, and joy and love and most of all surprises. We are assured that God's love and joy are all around us and that one only needs to look and you may very well be surprised by where God's love is. And when we do see it, we're invited share it with others.

May it be so.

Amen.