



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

The Source.

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 15:3-10

July 2, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

It is really good to be back with you. As you know, I have been away for the month of June and if you didn't know that, don't tell me. Half of that time I was in Montreat, North Carolina, where I had the deep privilege to share the keynote with my daughter, the Rev. Sarah Are Speed, for the Montreat Youth Conference.

Each summer, Montreat provides six weeks of youth conferences. Our own youth from Village will leave this coming weekend to attend Week Three of the conference. Sarah and I were privileged to keynote for Weeks One and Two. There were about 500 youth in attendance Week One and during Week Two, there were more than 1,000 youth. Each morning Sarah and I had an opportunity to speak with them. And the theme that the conference planning teams have chosen for the summer is "In Joy."

Each morning begins with what the youth conference calls 'energizers.' They teach you dance moves that the entire group does to music. There are a 1,000 youth standing up in their pews (not on their pews but in their pews); all are making the same moves. It's quite, well, energizing. If you think I'm going to share that with you, you are out of your mind. That stays in Montreat.

But I do want to share some of the messages from Montreat because joy is something that we all need. And joy is something that God wants us to know. As children of God, we can live in joy.

So, over this month, I want to explore with you the reality of joy in our lives. For this to make sense, we will first need to recognize that joy and happiness are not the same thing. At least, as I understand these dispositions of the heart.

Happiness is tied to circumstances being positive. Happiness is something that finds us when life is good. I want to talk about that more next Sunday. But life is not

good all the time. Life is hard. Sometimes brutal. And yet, joy is deeper water. It is not tied to the circumstances of our lives, but rather, joy is often an act of courage. It is both grace as well as the fruit of discipline. Joy is less the result of what the world has done to us and more the result of what God has done for us. So, we want to reflect on what brings us not just happiness, but joy.

To begin, I want to invite us to think about something that maybe you haven't thought about very much and that is: What do you suppose brings God joy? My daughter wrote a poem, and she is a wonderful poet, and in one particular poem, she wonders about the source of God's joy. It's called, "Conversations with God: Joy." It begins:

God, I asked, what brings you joy?
O my child, God said, the list is so long.
Hearing you say my name
And seeing you soak in this beautiful creation bring me joy.
When you stand with family, neighbors and strangers,
And sing, or work together, my heart risks overflowing with joy.
When you remember the children, and the quiet and the hurting... I swear my heart could take flight.¹

I read those words and maybe for the first time, I began wonder what is it that brings God joy. I think the parables of Luke 15 had an answer to that question. These repeated parables are all about rejoicing. I say repeated parables because these stories are told and retold and retold.

In these stories, something is lost, something is found and there is great rejoicing. A sheep is lost, a sheep is found and there is rejoicing. A coin is lost, a coin is found and there is rejoicing. Keep reading. A

1 Sarah Are Speed, "Conversations with God: Joy." Most of Sarah's poetry can be found at writingthegood.com.

son is lost, a son is found and there is rejoicing. Jesus repeats himself. Clearly, it is a lesson he thinks we need to hear over and over again.

Now I appreciate how respectful you were when the passage was read. It is scripture and Jesus is the one telling these stories, so we take these stories as inspired and inspiring, but I hope you noticed that these stories are ridiculous. I am certain that the first hearers of these stories just fell all over themselves laughing.

Jesus says, “Which one of you if you had 100 sheep, and you lost one, who among you would not leave the 99 in wilderness where there are lions and tigers and bears?” Of course, you would traverse the hills and valleys of the wilderness in search of the one lost sheep who can’t follow the one rule for sheep. You don’t know the one rule? It’s stay with the other sheep. Because you know what a sheep wandering off by itself in the wilderness is called? Dinner. Because providence has not granted sheep defenses. They do not have the speed of a gazelle; they can barely outrun a slug. They do not have fangs or claws. Just wool; that’s it. Their only defense is stay with the other sheep. So, if you lost one, who wouldn’t leave the 99 in the wilderness where there are lions and tigers and bears... oh my!

Yes, go and search for the one sheep who can’t follow the one sheep rule. And when you find that lost sheep? Who wouldn’t throw a party for the whole neighborhood? I found my sheep! Now who wouldn’t do that?

Or, if you lost a quarter, who wouldn’t rip up the carpets, move the heavy appliances out on the lawn, bring in those big search lights, look in the corners, down the heating vents? And when you find your quarter, who wouldn’t invite the entire congregation over for a barbecue—with a vegan option? Spend a bazillion dollars on a party because you found your quarter, now who wouldn’t do that?

Nobody does that. I’m not doing that. Nobody does this. We can calculate better than that. We know when to cut our losses. No reasonable person lives like this.

So, these aren’t stories about us. These are stories about God. If I understand the text, Jesus is telling us that we have no idea how much joy God finds in us—in you. If we ask: What is the source of God’s joy? Well, Jesus says, “It’s you.” And that is something Jesus evidently thinks we need to hear over and over and over again because he repeats the message again and again.

I don’t know what brings you joy. Maybe springtime

or a good conversation with a friend. Maybe a grandchild or a job well done. But Jesus tells us what brings God joy is you.

I don’t know if you have a lot of people in your life who commence rejoicing simply because you show up. These stories make me think of my grandparents, or my grandmother, in particular.

When we were growing up, my grandparents lived out of state. We would travel to their house for vacation. We drove from Montgomery, Alabama, through the swelter of the south, to the small town in South Carolina where my father grew up. These were the days before cars had air conditioning. The family station wagon had vinyl seats that would leave the patterns of the seats pressed into the backs of our legs. And it was hot. So, for air conditioning, we rolled down the windows to let that Alabama heat blow through the car. It was like traveling in a convection oven.

After hours of cooking (in the car), we would pull into my grandmother’s driveway and she would be waiting on the front steps. Before we could even get out of the car, she would be squealing, “Get over here, get over here, get yourself over here and give me a hug!” She was rejoicing. She would grab me by the shoulders and say, “Just look at you! You are getting so big! I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays.” (I don’t know exactly how long that is, it’s just the way she talked.) “Get over here and give me a hug.” And she would pull me and my siblings into her.

“Oh my,” she would say, “I am so happy for this day!” She called my grandfather, ‘Boss.’ He wasn’t, but that’s what she called him. “Boss, get out here and look at these children!”

I could feel myself growing just standing there. It was only after my grandfather came out that anyone would acknowledge that my father, their own son, had arrived as well.

I don’t know if you have people in your life who are like that. Probably not many. You come home from work, walk through the door. I came back. Didn’t I have to? Not much reaction.

I came in this morning. There was Rodger. He’s the kindest guy I know. But Rodger didn’t say, “Tom, I haven’t seen you in a month! Get over here and give me a hug. Look at you, you are getting so big!”

No. Just, “Hey, good to see you.” That’s it. Of course, that’s what you’d expect. That’s how it is with us. We

are more calculated. Oh, we find joy in one another. We do. And we find joy in God, of course. But it's more measured isn't it? More reasonable. That's mostly the way it is with us.

I suppose that's why Jesus feels he needs to repeat himself over and over and over again—that we might begin to understand just how much joy there is in heaven. It's the joy that God holds for her children. Every last one. Even the lost ones.

So he asks: Who among you, if you lost a quarter, wouldn't move all the furniture out on the lawn and

when you find your quarter, call all your friends to come and rejoice, come and rejoice, for I have found that which was lost? Now, who wouldn't do that?

Well, these aren't stories about us. We don't act like that. They are about God. Jesus kept telling these stories. And I imagine people loved his stories. These stories made them laugh and laugh. Nobody acts like this.

But I can't help but notice he begins the story every time with the same question: Who among you...? That's how he starts. Who among you...? You don't suppose he is really asking, do you?