

Luke 15: 11-24

**C.S. Lewis – Surprised by Joy**

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Do you want to know what, for me, is the hardest piece of theme preaching? It is finding the perfect scripture reading that supports the topic or direction for the day. Now you might think that the Bible has a lot to say about joy – my topic for today – which in a way it does, but mostly in one-liners, or as an emotional expression of the moment. I really wanted to find that perfect story that puts it all together, but that did not happen. So I had to revert to one of the gospel stories which initially I did not want to do because you and I have heard the story of the prodigal son a million times, and I am sure that I won't be able to shed any new insight about this story.

I am using it as background for one reason: to unravel the underlying theme of the story which I think is joy; the joy of the father seeing his child well and alive back home; the joy of the son knowing that he is loved unconditionally, no matter where he has been and what he has done. We also see the bitterness of the brother who couldn't seem to see the joy of the father and his brother but who feels cheated and neglected. He chose the path of bitterness.

It's a story that I feel, not perfectly, but to a great extent connects with the life of C.S. Lewis who, in his youth, rejected faith and left it behind. In his 30's, he returned, first to a faith in God, and a little later to Christianity after a tremendous amount of soul searching. The prodigal son came home. And what he found in the end, was joy.

Clive Staples (Jack) Lewis was born in 1898 into an Anglo-Irish family in Belfast. After what he calls a blandly Christian childhood he threw himself heart and soul into a rationalist and idealist atheism that he professed and lived. Young Jack's intelligence was subtle, his curiosity boundless, his acumen amazing, and his dialectical power exceptional.

In 1916 Lewis received a scholarship to University College, Oxford. He interrupted his studies after the outbreak of WWI, enlisting in the British Army in 1917. On April 15, 1918, Lewis was wounded in the Battle of Arras and was discharged a little more than a year later in December 1919. He continued his studies, and in 1925, Lewis was appointed Fellow and Tutor in English Literature at Oxford University, where he served for twenty-nine years until 1954. He then accepted the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, where he finished out his career.

In 1956 Lewis married Joy Davidman Gresham, an American writer fifteen years his junior. You might remember the movie "Shadowlands" which is the telling of their love story. After a four-year fight with bone cancer, Joy passed away in 1960. Lewis continued to care for her two sons, Douglas and David Gresham.

C. S. Lewis died at his home on November 22, 1963. His grave is in the yard of Holy Trinity Church in Headington Quarry, Oxford.

Lewis left us many famous works, with the Chronicles of Narnia at the top of the list. Other titles are Mere Christianity, and The Screwtape Letter. He wrote a little book by the title "The Problem of Pain" which recounts his grief over the loss of his beloved wife and his journey back. But the book I'd like to focus on is called "Surprised by Joy, the shape of my early life" which is his account of his journey from Atheism to Christianity.

The one theme that runs deep and rich through Lewis's writings is Joy. Joy, according to Lewis, is neither happiness nor pleasure. Instead, it is a desire for a place where we have never been. It is a voice that beckons for another land. Let me let him define what he means and read an excerpt:

"For those who are still disposed to proceed I will only underline the quality common to the three experiences; it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasure in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is."  
(17-18)

This is a key passage. Lewis communicates four important things to the reader.

First, he defines joy as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”

Second, he sets joy apart from happiness and pleasure.

Third, he claims that a particular experience of joy produces a longing to repeat that same experience. With a little research, I learned that Lewis’ understanding of joy was shaped by the German idea of *Sehnsucht*, a piercing desire in the human heart.

And fourth, he says humans have no power to produce joy on their own. Joy surprises us because it arrives unexpectedly, leaving behind “the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing” (72). The stab means, as he says later, “All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still ‘about to be’” (78).

It is this Joy, this longing, this *Sehnsucht*, which eventually drew Lewis from atheism to Christ. Throughout the book, Lewis names one medium of joy after another that eventually leads him back. I could not help thinking about the things in my own life that bring joy. They bear a striking resemblance to his: family, friends, love, books, music, solitude, shared enthusiasms, intellectual discovery, and imaginative wonder.

In the next to last chapter of the book, called “Checkmate,” he brings this part of his journey to a conclusion. Lewis becomes aware that before he even could name God as the object of his longing, God first desired him. God posed the ultimate interference in his life, demanding “All.”

At last, Lewis “admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps that night, (he was) the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” In retrospect, he acknowledges that God compelled him to come home when he was a prodigal son “brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape” And he realized that “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.” (p. 229)

I love faith conversion stories. Although each and every person goes his or her own way, they all speak of the soul’s longing for its true home with God. And once you have arrived, you know what joy is. It is more than pleasure or happiness. Joy goes deeper, much deeper.

Joy is knowing that despite the troubles all will be well.

Joy is knowing that God will be there, no matter what.

Joy does not depend on circumstance.

Joy is living a life with purpose.

Joy is knowing that nothing can separate me and you from the love of God.

What is joy to you? Think about it. Joy always points to something beyond itself. It's a moment in time that lets us look deeper into what life and what faith is all about. Maybe it is holding the new-born baby in your arms for the first time, or it is watching that gorgeous sunset, or realizing that the person next to you will love you unconditionally.

What brings you joy? Think about it. And take it a step further: does your faith bring you joy? As I was working on this sermon, I thought about this myself, and I realized that when I, in my teenage years, began to connect with God through scripture and sacred music, I got this sense of freedom and ultimately joy. I realized that I can live my life joyfully with the presence of God despite the circumstances of living under a pretty oppressive regime in East Germany. And I realized I had a choice.

C. S. Lewis once said that God whispers to us in our joys, speaks to us in our difficulties and shouts in our pain.

Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional. We cannot avoid pain, but we can avoid joy. God has given us such immense freedom that God will allow us to be as miserable as we want to be or as joyful as we want to.

We all know people who spend their entire lives practicing being unhappy, diligently pursuing joylessness. They get more mileage from having people feel sorry for them than from choosing to live out their lives in the context of joy.

Joy is simple (not to be confused with easy). At any moment in life, we have at least two options, and one of them is to choose an attitude of gratitude, a posture of grace, a commitment to joy.

Amen