

I remember the fruit of the Spirit from a song my classmate from seminary (Robert Alexander) wrote for the after-school program we led for kids in our neighborhood at Eastlake. It goes like this: *I am a tree with roots, and a trunk and branches and leaves...When I make fruit oh which kind will it be? I want to be the kind of fruit God wants people to see. Oh which kind of fruit will I be? I want LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS and SELF-CONTROL!* Today we continue with "Rooting and Fruiting: Tending the Wild Garden." Today's fruit is JOY. Every Sunday the first words out of my mouth are from Ps. 118:24- *This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.* Why? Because we have to remember that no matter the kind of day we're having, God makes today and everyday possible. But many times we find ourselves not feeling particularly joyful because of our circumstances. I think we're a bit confused with our understanding of biblical joy, for it is not the same as our cultural understanding of joy. What English words do we use to describe the feeling we have when we're in a good mood? Happy? Cheerful? Joyful? Being in a good mood is really great, but it is not sustainable nor authentic to remain that way constantly. Somehow we think that happiness equals joyfulness, and it doesn't. Biblical joy is more than a happy feeling. Biblical joy is a lasting emotion that comes from the choice to trust that the God of love will fulfill God's promise. I don't know if you all have read the Bible lately (I hope so), but it is not a joyfest, to say the least. "No, we live in a world that's been corrupted by our own sin- our greed and selfishness. It's marked by death and loss and the Bible is much the same. This is where biblical faith offers a unique perspective on joy. Biblical joy is one that

smacks right in the face of our culture and world” (The Bible Project, *Joy*). Yesterday, several of us gathered to celebrate the life of Betty Collins and to give witness to the Resurrection. Betty wrote a letter to her family telling them that she loved them and to be joyful, not sad. What I think she meant, much like we find in Nehemiah, is for them to tend joy in the spiritual garden of their lives. Don’t just dwell in the sadness for biblical joy is much more than sadness or happiness. In all things rejoice in the Lord! I love and am inspired by Betty’s faith to write such a love letter to her family as she was facing death. People who talk about joy in the Bible aren’t really happy at all. And today, we’re looking at only two of these many examples: the first one is from the Old Testament in Nehemiah and the second one is in the New Testament in Paul’s letter to the Church in Philippi. In the Book of Nehemiah, we find a disjunct people. Lots of devastating things have taken place in their lives, including the loss of the temple of Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders taken as captives to Babylon for years and now many of them have returned home to a destroyed Judah. Ezra, the priest, and Nehemiah, the governor, constantly remind the people of Israel that God is faithful. Yet, they have returned to their war-ravaged land, and in their hearts, they believe the calamity was due to their own faithlessness. The sadness and heartache are palpable. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the people that even though times are hard, they need not mourn, because God’s own joy will lift their hearts and enable them to face whatever comes. And Paul writes to the church in Philippi from jail. He keeps reminding them to rejoice in the Lord...always. Before turning to God’s word for us this day, first let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Eat the fat and drink the sweet wine. Really? Joy and rejoicing do not seem to make sense when people are engrossed in their misery. But as the Scriptures often do, the story of Nehemiah offers advice that goes against everything we know. Nehemiah tells them not to default to gloom and doom. Instead, he says, choose genuine joy. The reason for this is recorded in verse 10: *for the joy of the LORD is your strength*. God reminds us of the ground on which we stand. As a child, I had to learn catechisms or a set of beliefs. The first one? What is the chief end of man, but I changed it in my mind to say people. The chief end- our main purpose in life- is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. But we don't think about joy in serious or sad times or when our lives are falling apart. But what if we thought about joy as an act of resistance or defiance? An act of faith?

Paul, even writing from prison, believed that joy is the gift of God's Spirit, a sign of Jesus' presence with us inspiring hope in the midst of hardship. "When you believe that Jesus' love has overcome death itself, joy becomes reasonable in the darkness of circumstances. Now, this doesn't mean that you ignore or suppress your sorrow. No! That's not real or healthy or necessary. Paul often expressed his grief and sadness. He called it being full of sorrow and yet rejoicing (2 Cor. 3:10). As he acknowledged his pain, he also made a choice to trust Jesus that his loss wouldn't be the final work. This is very different from the cliché 'Turn that frown upside down!' No, "Paul rejoices at the beauty of faith itself and his friends' faithfulness. From the horrible conditions of prison, Paul tells the people of the Philippian church that they are his joy. He urges them to always rejoice in the Lord.

Why? Because joy is not rooted in what is happening around us or to us. It is rooted in what is happening eternally in Christ” (Gamble). The more we talk with Jesus, the more we recognize that his wise company is the ultimate joy of life” (The Bible Project, *Joy*). Joy is something that we must tend to in our spiritual garden.

The wild and unshakeable Spirit never gives up nor is She “discouraged by chaos or emptiness and is always bringing new life even when the ground seems fallow and there are no ingredients left with which to work. The Spirit needs no ingredients. She is the ingredient” (Eugenia Anne Gamble, *Tending the Wild Garden*). Eugenia Anne Gamble, the author of *Tending the Wild Garden*, tells a story of a picture she saw recently. In the midst of the ravages and horrors of war in Ukraine, there were high school students dressed up for their prom posing “amid the rubble of their destroyed school. Even in the rubble of human brokenness, the Holy Spirit weaves defiant joy.” The amazing sculptor Michelangelo, “when asked how he got the inspiration to create a beautiful angel, responded, ‘I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.’ Joy itself in these days is an act of resistance to the dominant pessimism, violence, and meanness that color too much of life. Our job as tenders of joy is to make space for it, to cut away the things that are not joy until the angelic is revealed” (Gamble).

Around here at Triune, the stories move me to tears and yet also fill me with joy. I ask how someone who has no home is doing and many times their answers are as I expect. It’s hard. You’re tired of being tired. You’re

afraid for your life. You're angry and hurt. But there are the occasional answers that blow my mind and strengthen my faith. The answers like, "Pastor, the joy of the Lord is my strength." You know- these words in Nehemiah that take root in us and ripen. "Spirit joy flows from God's grace. It gives us power to go beneath our circumstances and find the deeper roots that cannot be moved or removed. Joy does not erase circumstances nor make them more palatable. It is not a Pollyanna optimism. Joy, rather, allows us to face life square on even when it is hard. Spirit joy ripens in us when we realize that what we are experiencing has within it seeds for growth, unexpected grace, new insight and meaning. True joy that flows from the Spirit must be nurtured and tended with love" (Gamble).

"Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel described a memory of a fellow prisoner trading a ration of bread for materials with which to piece together a makeshift menorah during Hanukkah. Shocked that the man would trade something so essential to his survival, Wiesel asked him, "Hanukkah in Auschwitz?" And the man replied, "Especially in Auschwitz." In World War I, soldiers on both sides were known to cultivate gardens in the trenches. In 1915, a soldier named Gotthold von Rohden described a trench adorned with Howitzer cartridge cases that had been used as pots to hold snowdrops. Other soldiers wrote home requesting flower seeds to plant" (Ingrid Fettell [Lee](#)). Joy amid great struggle is an act of tremendous defiance and faith.

A friend and colleague of mine shared that one of her favorite Peanuts comic strips. In the first frame Snoopy is doing his famous dance- twirling around and looking at the ceiling. Then Lucy pops into the next frame and says, “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know that people are dying from starvation and war?” The final frame shows Snoopy dancing again. It’s like year...I know that, and I choose to rejoice anyway. You see, as followers of Jesus Christ, we’ve got a joy that the world cannot steal. I love the video that went viral several years ago of a girl named Loren from Dickson, TN, who stood out as her children’s choir was singing in church. That girl was full of the Holy Spirit. She was just a singing and a dancin’ and didn’t care who saw it! Her joy was so contagious. She sang, “Can’t you feel it? Won’t you choose it? I’ve got an old church choir singing in my soul. I’ve got a sweet salvation, and it’s beautiful. I’ve got a heart overflowing cause I’ve been restored. There ain't nothing gonna steal my joy. No, there ain't nothing gonna steal my joy” ([video](#)). So many things can ripen joy if we permit it.

How do we access joy in our lives? Can you think of a time where God’s joy bubbled up in you in a difficult time and made you strong? There will always be weeds that try and choke out joy but here are several spiritual practices we can do together. 1. We can ask God’s Spirit to help us tend to the joy already within us and to choose joy in our daily lives. We can also ask to see the face of God everywhere. 2. I talked about saying out loud the verse from Psalm 118:24- “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,” and we can also at the end of the day remember and

reflect on one thing that brought us joy. This is a way to end the day for gratitude in our heart and joy in our spirit. Joy is a muscle and a gift from God. We cannot manufacture it; it's created through relationship with God. For some, worship ripens joy in us. For others, being in nature ripens joy. Even John Calvin urged his parishioners not to cut down trees and to study bees to learn God's ways (Gamble). Music can also be a way to ripen joy for us. I know it does for me. Regardless of how we ripen joy in ourselves, "joy is rooted in God's love and our trust that in God we are headed in a good direction. This kind of unshakable joy comes to us when we know that nothing can separate us from Christ. Not life. And not death. Joy wells up from the assurance that the Spirit meets our every need, and no matter where we are in life, the best is always yet to come" (Gamble). Thanks be to God for joy! Amen.