



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon December 11, 2022 Rev. David Jones “Deepening Joy”

Today is Rejoice Sunday, a Sunday to *experience* joy for ourselves. This is no small thing. With Hope and Peace Sunday, my instinct is to contextualize and even to understate, because it can be an awful burden to place on someone’s shoulders, to say to them “be hopeful,” or “have peace.” Maybe those things are out of reach for someone on a given day. I want those Sundays to reflect our community approach to faith; on Hope Sunday or Peace Sunday, I want us all to be reminded that these are things we achieve only together, and that if you don’t have hope or can’t find peace in your life, not to worry, that is why we are all here for one another. But Joy Sunday is different, I have the opposite instinct. It may very well be a burden to expect that we all will experience Joy today, but, I want to take the chance and risk saying, we all *deserve* to experience joy today. We are all God’s children. Imagine what you want for your children, or for the children of this world, and today, I want to say that’s also what you deserve. We all deserve it, whether we are young or old.

It is also a practical imperative, isn’t it? We can fight for justice and peace without really thinking we’ll get there. But we can’t put the work in for those things, we can’t even talk about them let alone try to move the needle for them, if we don’t occasionally have a laugh. All that we seek to do, all that we imagine and believe God to be doing among us—with us and through us—it can’t just exist between the ears, it can’t just be about having the right idea or the most virtuous opinion, it also has to be life-improving for us to continue to be involved in it, it has to actually also give us joy. For some of us, we are an easy laugh, joy is always just sitting there in our belly waiting for the first opportunity, the first excuse, to burst out into the world. For some of us, it is very difficult to experience joy. It may be painfully rare. But it is only more precious for its rarity. Maybe you are joyful today, maybe you have to remember the feeling, maybe you have to intentionally call it to mind.

I watched the movie *A Christmas Story* for the first time recently, I’m not sure how I went so long without seeing it. I was overwhelmed by its sweetness and joyfulness, and struck by how well it helped me remember what it was like to see the world through my eyes as a child at Christmas. For example, I love when Ralphie is composing and then turning in his theme paper to Miss Shields, how the narration imbues this simple homework task about what he wants from Santa for Christmas with ecstatic giddiness and profundity, even though the actual words he submits are banal and to the point. Because when we are little, what we want for Christmas is never just an object, never just a status symbol, it is a full and enveloping *experience*! It is about who we are, how we see ourselves, who we want to become, how we want to spend our time. To write a letter to Santa about this experience is a testament to our whole selves and all we stand for. And children know this.

I remember writing to Santa and trying, in earnest, to be mindful, as I crafted my letter, to if I had been naughty or nice, and calculating in light of my findings, what tone I should use in my letter, how insistent I should be or how plaintive and deferential. I would try to determine whether the upshot of my letter should be: a) “I want this thing, and you know, it’s really not my place to say, but I probably *should* receive it in light of all my good deeds—I mean, that is if you think the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice and there should be some fairness at involved here;” or, b) “I really want this thing even though I haven’t been as good as I know I could have been and *should* have been...Isn’t it just ironic

though, that this gift would probably make me into a better and kinder person..." (I figured in that case that I could at least give Santa something to think about).

I had a joy-filled childhood. Rejoice Sundays were every Sunday just about. Not everyone is so lucky. Maybe some of us here today do better to remember joy by thinking about the holiday seasons when they were a little older, maybe a little more independent. Maybe what brings you joy is not Santa or *receiving* a gift, but rather knowing someone so well, seeing and appreciating them so completely, that you more than anyone else know just what gift to *give them*.

Or maybe your joy flows from what you do for others over the holidays, community service or hosting family. Maybe your joy consists in being charitable, or maybe your joy is that finally, this world, for a few weeks, looks a little more like what we are always saying it should look. Maybe your joy is that moment, finally, when people do not just pass you by on the street, or ignore your living conditions, but suddenly become generous and offer you a helping hand. Maybe your joy will be short lived, when the New Year comes, and resolutions become self-centered, and the bright lights of charity and community dim once again.

Our scriptures today speak of joy, but not of Christmas or Santa, not of charity, not of unexpected but fleeting kindness. They speak of the deep rejoicing of the marginalized, the oppressed, and the poor when they are marginalized, oppressed, and poor no longer. Isaiah says that a new way, a Holy Way, is coming, a way that will be open and affirming of all people regardless of ability. And when John the Baptist asks Jesus if he is the one, if he is the one he has foretold, the one he and his disciples have been waiting for or if they should wait for another, Jesus does not tell John his opinion, he does not express a religion, he does not even teach about morals or ethics. Rather, to answer John, Jesus *reports* what has been done and what will be done. He states as a fact, that the lives of those in 1st century Palestine that have been persecuted are being transformed. Those who have been set at the margins and told by the powerful to accept hardship and misery and lives devoid of joy, have now been placed at the center of his ministry. And that in the new world that is coming, in the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God or the kingdom of justice that is near and among us, the least of the people living in that holy place will be greater than the greatest of prophets in this unholy one. The proof that Jesus is Messiah, or that he is truly worthy of John's prophecy—that he is fulfilling it—is that the world is changing wherever he goes. The proof is on the field, it is by the road, it is in the schools and the houses of worship: those who have not had, who have been told they are less, who have been made sorrowful and have sighed under the weight of this world's oppression, are now the ones who rejoice.

Everyone of us deserves to lead lives full of rejoicing days, to experience joy as often as we can. But Rejoice Sunday in Advent goes deeper than the joy of an unwrapped Christmas gift. It is deeper than charity. It is deeper than being the beneficiary, finally, of uncommon kindness in an unkind world. Rejoice Sunday is about the promised transformation of this world, from one that is unequal to one that is equal. The Messiah is merely the one or the ones who keep this promise.

Alleluia and amen.