



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Time to Wake Up!
to True Joy...found in stuff,
or God, community, and
ourselves?*

Psalm 146:5–10

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This morning we are looking at True Joy and for me, there was one word that epitomized True Joy—at least when I was about 8 years old—and that word was: Voltron! When I was 8, Christmas joy that year was all about this toy called Voltron. There were quite a few knock-off versions but the one I wanted was this really cool metal version with lots of difference pieces. Then, sure enough, on that very special Christmas Day, I saw a large box under the Christmas tree and it was none other than Voltron! Now that was true joy! Or so I thought....

Now don't get me wrong, in the moment Voltron did provide a lot of happiness. But, as we know, that type of short-term happiness isn't the same thing as real, deep, lasting true joy. This was evident by the fact that by the following Christmas, my definition of true joy was no longer Voltron, it was He-man. And it was only a couple short years after I gave away my beloved Voltron toy for bigger and better things.

This morning we'll be exploring True Joy together—we could call it a workshop on joy. I'd like to think that we all understand at some level that true joy certainly doesn't come from items or material things, but something more. We also know all too well that we live in a society that bombards us with messages that we shouldn't be joyous with what we have, but that what we have isn't enough; and that we would experience greater joy if we had more, bigger or better: more money, more attractiveness, a newer toy, a new car, a better job, a bigger house and on and on.

And we know true joy just doesn't work that way. This idea of: if I just have this one thing or accomplish this one thing—then I will have joy. We know it's just not true. I feel like most of us intellectually know this, but I wonder how many of us can fall into this pattern of thinking and missing out on even greater joy. We could say that joy is found in the journey not the destination.

But if true joy isn't found in material things, where is it found? We tend to know it when we experience it: It's the joy of being with the people we love, or the feeling that comes

2 from helping others in need or something as simple as the happy singing of a child. Why, just the other day I experienced the amazing joy of hearing Amy belt out at full voice a song from the new *Frozen 2* movie. My joy would only have been that much better if it weren't at 5 am in the morning, but I'll certainly take it!

This morning we'll be looking at True Joy from 3 different perspectives: What the Bible says about joy, what a clinical psychologist says about joy and what we all here have to say about joy. At the end of all this, I have a suspicion that while we may not all become joy experts, that we will all know a little more about what we call True Joy. I also suspect that when we think about what gives us true joy, it's found most often in 3 places: God, in each other (our community) and in working towards a meaningful purpose.

Let's start with scripture. Our scripture today is from Psalms:

PSALM 146:5–10

⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Hebrew Biblical Scholar J Clinton McCann writes: "As the whole sweep of the psalter makes clear, Joy(Happiness) is not the absence of pain and trouble but the presence of a God who cares about human hurt and who acts on behalf of the afflicted and the oppressed. The sovereign God stands for and works for justice, not simply as an abstract principle but as an embodied reality—provision for basic human needs, liberation from oppression, empowerment for the disenfranchised and dispossessed."

Psalm 146 anticipates Jesus' preaching of the reign of God, as well as Jesus' teaching about happiness and his enactment of God's will in a ministry of justice, feeding, liberation, healing and compassion.

Put simply, the psalm states that True Joy is found when we put our hope in God and when we work for justice for the oppressed—caring for the least among us—God, community working towards a meaningful purpose.

Isn't it true that many of the great narratives of all time are about heroes facing their fears, rising to meet seemingly insurmountable challenges, and working for justice for the disenfranchised from oppressive forces of greed and evil?

This past Monday, at our board meeting, I sat next to Barry Garman and he said that with the new *Star Wars* movie just a couple days away, that he expects to hear at least one *Star Wars* reference in this sermon, so Barry, this is for you!

One could look at the entirety of *Star Wars* as a reflection of this psalm—setting prisoners free, executing justice for the oppressed, giving food to the hungry, caring for strangers, upholding the orphan and widow, and bringing the way of the wicked to ruin. It's the stuff great stories are made of.

In fact, if someone who had never heard of the entire Biblical narrative or *Star Wars* movies, you could really explain the stories with virtually the same description:

Stories from a long time ago in lands far far away where a group of poor disenfranchised sinners and slaves stand against an evil empire that uses fear and violence to oppress others all in the name of peace. The villains operate out of hate and greed while the heroes are brought together by a sense of community, a drive for justice and faith in a force greater than themselves, a force that represents the goodness in all living things!

Ironically, it's often when we enter the midst of tragedy head on that we can experience true joy. It's being in that hospital room with someone in need of a calming presence, it's raising our voices against injustices.

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That's the Biblical perspective. So in preparation for this next part, I was able to have a brief interview with one of my adult piano students at Lebanon valley college—Nancy Farber Kent, a member at Palmyra Church of the Brethren, musician and Clinical Psychologist with many years of experience practicing.

I asked her, in your years of experience working with many different people, what have you found gives people true joy?

Nancy began by saying that it's really interesting that at the end of the day, true joy is really what most people are seeking and that joy isn't the same thing as happiness. *Happiness* is a state of emotion, whereas *joy* is much richer and deeper and stems from a place of gratitude and purpose.

True joy can come from gratitude—cultivating the practice of looking at even the littlest things being grateful and experiencing the true joy that comes from that gratitude for God's creation.

True Joy also comes from meaning and connection—feeling authentically connected to other human beings.

True Joy comes from doing something meaningful that we are passionate about—using our God given gifts for a purpose greater than ourselves.

When I asked Nancy what she finds gets in the way of experiencing true joy, for most people she says, what gets in the way are things like:

Fear of missing out (FOMO)—and the overwhelm what accompanies it

Comparing oneself to others and more specifically—Comparing yourself to people's outsiders (perceptions)—thinking others have it better, have more, are happier and our social media culture certainly perpetuates that.

Finally, I asked what has she seen that is most effective in helping people experience more true joy in their lives. She said:

When people face their fears, doing meaningful things they really want to do, but fear to do what they feel called to do—example: facing your fears—asking a friend to be an emergency contact..., reaching out to call, trying something new...taking piano lessons...listening deep to hear the call of things to do.

Fear's biggest imbolizers: fear of not being good enough, fear of rejection.

Her closing thoughts were that:

True joy is a trait, not a state or experience. True joy in all it's fullness is something that can be cultivated and developed as a practice. She also notes it's impossible to experience true joy all the time, we will have negative moments and it's important to have a plan for those moments when we experience-darkness, loneliness and fear.

She encourages her clients that when they feel that darkness, imagine those millions of others that are feeling the same way—they are feeling it too—you are part of a community and of something greater than yourself.

God, community and working towards a meaningful purpose.

So, now it's our turn, what do we say?

Ultimately our joy in the end comes from the love we experience from God and from each other, the celebration of being courageous, helping those in need, and bettering ourselves along the way. Using our gifts and talents for good, maximizing our potential. God, community and working towards a meaningful purpose. Now that is something to stand and sing about!

