

Every single one of us has had the experience of doing something we really did not want to do, and some of us have that experience daily!

You know how it goes—you have to show up for a job you hate, or an appointment you dread, or a social occasion that you know is going to be long and boring.

And you drag yourself there, but your heart really is not in it at all.

You would rather be somewhere, anywhere else.

Maybe that is how some of you are feeling about being here this morning.

Well, our faith has a lot to say about not only our behavior, but the intentions and attitudes underlying our behavior. God cares not only about what we do, but what is inside our hearts and minds when we are doing it.

Do we do things grudgingly, reluctantly, or with an open heart and with joy?

The passage we just heard from 2 Corinthians, chapter 9 addresses this very thing.

Here Paul is writing to a church in turmoil about their giving, or what he calls the “...offering for the saints.” He implores them to give generously, but then goes on to address not just the amount, but the **attitude** with which they give.

He tells the Corinthians to give willingly, not reluctantly, or under compulsion, but with joy. He writes: “God loves a **cheerful** giver” or as The Message states,

“God loves it when the giver **delights** in the giving.”

Nothing is worse than a gift grudgingly given, or a gift with strings attached.

Of course, today is Commitment Sunday in our church, when we have a chance to offer our financial pledge to our shared ministry in the coming year.

It is a time for us to joyfully dedicate a portion of our resources to the work of God. It is a time to remember that we are privileged to be a part of something so much greater than ourselves. A time to delight in the ability to give.

It is no secret that times are tough, the economy is bad and we have all felt the pinch of these ongoing challenges. The news just goes from bad to worse!

But as I have said before and will say again, this is no time for us to become stingy and cut back. Now, more than ever, is a time to give with even greater generosity, hope and joy than ever before.

Because although things are bad for us, they are so much worse for so many and your church is here to help them day after day.

And while we do it for the church we love and a mission we believe in, we also do it for us. Joyful generosity blesses us while it pleases God.

I remember a sermon I heard once in which the preacher said that if you are not a generous person, then you are spiritually constipated.

I thought “Joy” was a better title for my sermon than “Spiritual Constipation.”

It’s true; you cannot survive if you just take things in and never give anything out.

And after awhile you will wonder, why am I so uncomfortable,
why am I not happy or satisfied?

We were **not** created to just take in and take in and take in and never give anything back. We were made to give, to serve, to share.

That is where we find true contentment and joy.

And there is nothing more beautiful than a truly generous, giving person.

Like Evie Jo Wilson. Evie Jo is a delightful and positive woman who is 90 years old, has cancer, and could not be more happy or content.

Evie Jo is a reverse tither.

I did not know what that was until I read about her. Some faithful people try to follow the Biblical model of tithing 10% of their resources to God, and keeping the other 90%, well Evie Jo gives 90% to God’s work and keeps 10%.

When asked what prompted her to become a reverse tither she said:

“Well, it’s just so much fun. There is so much joy in it! Everything I give is mine forever, but whatever I try to keep I seem to lose. What I give away brings me such joy that it stays in my heart forever. It is what I give away that makes me feel like I am truly alive.”

Or consider Brad and Libby Birky.

The Birkey’s are an interesting young couple.

They had a pretty affluent lifestyle, but rarely had time to enjoy it.

They noticed that they found such joy through their volunteering at food banks and homeless shelters they wanted to do more to help those who suffer because it made them feel so good.

So they quit their jobs and opened the SAME Café and acronym for “So All Might Eat.”

It is located at East Colfax and Race, and what is unique about this place is that anyone can eat at the SAME Café for nothing. That's right—there really is a free lunch. It is not a soup kitchen, it's a restaurant.

Patrons who cannot afford to pay for their meal get it free, no questions asked. Other patrons who chose to do so are invited to pitch in a little extra to help cover those costs of all of the free meals they give away every day.

There are no prices listed in the menu, but everything seems to work out just fine.

In fact, some people are so generous that they pay enough for 10 people to eat there for free every day.

I invite you to visit SAME Café, the information is listed in your bulletin announcements this morning—including the web site.

The Birkey's have found such delight in using their lives to bless those in need.

They have found their true calling and purpose, and they are happier than they have ever been.

The followers of Jesus know that we find joy when we bless others.

We find joy when we discover a purpose that is bigger than we are.

We find joy knowing God loves us, and there is nothing we have to do, nothing we have to prove, God loves us just as we are. That is amazing.

Next Sunday is the First Sunday in Advent when we will begin preparing ourselves for the promise we have in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Luke's Gospel reminds us how the angel of the Lord came to the shepherds and told them: "I bring you good news of **great joy** which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

That good news of great joy is that God came to earth to bless us, help us and show us the way to abundant and everlasting life.

In her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott tells why she encourages her teenage son, Sam, to go to church:

"I make him go because I can ... I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people who belong to a community, who pray, or practice their faith — people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful."

So, what exactly does a joyful life look like?

First of all it is not something you can intentionally seek and find.

It comes when you do not look for it, when you forget about your own concerns and making yourself happy all the time. Shortly after Hurricane Ike hit the Texas coast there were images of the devastation all over the news.

(Incidentally, we will be sending a team to Galveston to work with the ongoing recovery efforts next April, see Jim Marshall to sign up).

Among those images I saw a man who drove down to Galveston from Dallas, so that he could be of help to the victims of that disaster.

You know they say the worst thing you can do is just show up after a disaster of that magnitude, but that is what he did. He filled his truck with bottled water and snacks and toiletries, and set up a location where he could pass them out.

The cameras showed him handing out these things and visiting with people who were homeless, and when they zoomed in on a close up of his face I thought that he looked like the happiest person on the face of the earth.

He was beaming he was so delighted to be there doing that, he might be there still. It dawned on me that while he was actually feeding others, this act of compassion was really feeding him. His soul and spirit were being nourished and nurtured by the opportunity to give and he was just joyful.

So joy it is not really something you can seek and find.

Secondly, joy is not a feeling. It is a condition of the heart, a state of being.

If it were a feeling it would come randomly and quickly fade away.

It would bring a momentary exuberance and then vanish.

True spiritual joy is deeper, something that abides no matter what our circumstances.

Paul was able to maintain such joy that he could write from a prison cell to the Christians in Philippi:

“I have learned in whatever state I am in to be happy. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound, in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:11-13)

Being centered in Christ gives us a happiness this world can never give.

And it helps you accept what you have instead of longing for what you lack. One of the new realities I am learning to embrace at this middle aged phase of my life is limitation, and I am even learning how to find joy in limitation.

Life will bring all of us limited physical abilities, stamina, and resources.

But limitation helps you focus and prioritize. There is a freedom in limitation because you understand how foolish it is to want what you cannot have. You understand how fragile and finite this life really is. You ultimately realize that you are here for such a short time, and you have to accept whatever life sends your way, even when it is very difficult.

And finally, joy is a choice we make, a difficult choice we make.

It is much easier when life is hard and sad to choose despair, to choose self pity.

The harder choice is to be a positive person in such a challenging world.

Tony Campolo, a well-known author wrote something in his book *Following Jesus without Embarrassing God* that has stayed with me. He wrote: “Frankly, the argument **against** believing in God or against placing one’s trust in Jesus is every bit as persuasive as the argument for it. So I chose to believe and trust. And that choice has made all the difference.”

A two-word imperative—“choose life”—concludes Moses’ final speech on the banks of the Jordan River. And following a long season of turmoil, Elijah announces that a time of choosing is at hand: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

“You cannot serve God and money,” Jesus tells us again and again that following a spiritual path is a choice that must be made.

May we all choose to live with simplicity, generosity and joy.

Because that is what truly delights and pleases God.

