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The Greater Joy of Kindness.

NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), Psalm 126:1-6.

- ¹ *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*
- ² *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”*
- ³ *The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*
- ⁴ *Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*
- ⁵ *May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*
- ⁶ *Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

CEB (Common English Bible), Mark 9:36-37.

- ³⁶ *Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said,*
- ³⁷ *“Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn’t actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me.”*

Good morning – and start off strong.

There’s a banner that is often draped in this sanctuary, and it reads: “Joy Service Center”. I

don’t remember exactly what Pastor Dave said when it appeared, but I think he read this

phrase on a building or a billboard or a sign when he was on the freeway, perhaps commuting

to or from this church. But no matter where he got the idea, joy is a great word for a Christian

church to use to identify itself – because God wants us to have joy and God wants us to bring joy to others. And God wants to feel great joy in us. It's fundamental to Christianity.

There are people who might find this banner fun, a great way to get a smile on everybody's face, to set the tone for an upbeat service. But to me, that banner is very meaningful on a deeper spiritual level.

You see, the first day I saw this banner in our sanctuary, it made me think of Psalm 126, our first reading today. The Psalms are my favorite Bible book; they're poetic, and even though they are ancient, they are elegant and highly readable. They tend to reflect raw emotion, sometimes in pain, sometimes in happiness. This Psalm was probably written after the Israelites returned to the land of Israel after their forced exile by the Babylonians. The Persians had just conquered the Babylonians and then they allowed the Israelites to return home. It might be that the Psalm was written after some other period of domination of the Chosen People by a foreign power, but the point of Psalm 126 is to tell us about the joy felt by God's people when they are lifted up and out of oppression.

So, let's step back and look at this relationship between God and the Chosen People.

This relationship was based on a kind of contract. In Bible language, we call it a covenant, but the Old Testament authors, in the way they describe this covenant, were probably influenced by something called a suzerain contract. This was a concept in wide use during the time and in the place where much of the Old Testament was written. This is a contract where one of the two parties, the suzerain, wields the true power. The suzerain sets up the conditions of the contract, but both sides of it must follow the contract. Often the suzerain was a king or a powerful invader, and the second party were the people of an area that

had been conquered or absorbed. In the Old Testament covenant, God was of course the suzerain. But like with any good contract, both parties received something valuable.

Here is how God engineered his suzerain contract with the Israelites. God promised to provide three things: land, progeny (or descendants), and God's blessing. In return, the Israelites had to live according to certain rules of morality. In the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon is presented as a punishment for the Israelites not honoring their side of their covenant with God the suzerain. Their crime consisted of practicing idolatry. This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, God using the armies of enemies of the Israelites to punish them when they didn't follow their side of their covenant with God.

The covenant made it clear when God's people could feel joy and when God could feel joy in his people. This was when both parties were following the constraints of the covenant, i.e., when the people lived by God's rules, and they, in return, received the blessing of God, were assured of many descendants, and could live in the land given to them by God.

What Psalm 126 is all about is the joy that God feels when we live the way God wants us to, and the gifts that we receive in return. But there is another gift that we receive, and that is the joy of making God joyous.

Now, getting set free from captivity is a pretty dramatic reason to be joyous. It makes the Psalm very powerful. But we don't live under the suzerain contract of the Old Testament. We do have a covenant with God, however. And this covenant demands that we live the way Jesus Christ taught us to live. The biggest requirement of that covenant by far is that we have faith in God.

Consider our second reading for the day. This story from the Gospel of Mark happens to come at the end of a passage where Jesus' disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest. This was common among Mediterranean men in ancient times; they competed to be the most honored. In this story, Jesus wants to teach them about humility, because that is one of the things Jesus asks of us - to be humble.

Importantly, in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, children were held in low regard and were expected to be obedient and highly dependent on adults. They didn't have the freedom that children in our society have today. In fact, in many translations of the Bible, the child in Mark 9 is not called "him" or "her", but rather, "it". So, what is happening in Mark 9 is that Jesus is identifying himself with the lowest members of society by showing his love for a child. He's telling his disciples that they should do the same; and in fact, Jesus is telling them that whatever they do for a child or for some other lowly person, they are doing for Jesus and ultimately for God.

This passage from Mark's Gospel isn't about something as exciting as a people being released from captivity. It's about the daily joy that can be felt by God and by us when serve God by serving other people - in particular, when we serve people who have little or no power.

I can remember a couple of incidents in my life when people humbly served God by taking care of me when I couldn't help myself.

When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I picked citrus with Mexican migrant workers. I would ride my bike to the shacks that Sunkist provided for them, getting there not long after dawn. We would climb into the back of trucks. We would sit facing each other along two benches that ran down the sides of each truck.

Now, at the beginning of the picking season, each of us was issued a large canvas sack with a shoulder strap, a pair of clippers, and two pairs of long leather gloves. The gloves were very important; the boys picked mostly lemons because the ladders were shorter than the ladders used with orange trees - but the lemon trees had sharp thorns.

One morning, as I was riding out in a truck, I looked inside my canvas bag and realized that I had grabbed two left gloves. That meant I had no glove for my right hand, my clipping hand. The thorns would shred my hand and forearm. I was panic-stricken. But across from me was an elderly man who I had picked with several times. It was common for the older men to pick with the boys. I knew that this man sent almost all of what he earned back to Mexico to help his daughter feed his grandchildren. That was his life – to provide for children. This man reached out across the truck and took one of my left gloves. Then, finger by finger, he turned it inside out. I was rescued. The man gave me a big grin. This man had found another child to serve.

I felt joy in being rescued. But so did the man who rescued me. We don't have to wait until the Persians release us from captivity and send us back to the Holy Land. We can feel joy each and every day. We don't even have to wait for someone to do something for us. We can feel joy simply by doing something for someone else. And one particularly powerful way of feeling joy is by helping someone who for some reason is unable to help themselves.

That man who performed the miracle of transforming a left glove into a right glove didn't have to help me. He could have just sat there silently, perhaps feeling sorry for himself because he earned so little and had so little in life. But he saw an opportunity for me to feel joy, for him to feel joy, and for God to feel joy in seeing people live the way they should.

The men I picked with took to heart this teaching that powerless people like children should be embraced. When I was picking in the orchards, the men looked after the boys. A foreman might give a boy like me a hard time, perhaps because I was filling the bottom of my crates with over-ripe fruit I had picked up off the ground. Well, when a foreman laid into one of the boys, the men would climb down their ladders and come between the foreman and the boy. If you want to yell at someone, yell at a man, they would explain.

Sometimes we can bring joy to someone simply by offering our love or companionship, or by including that person in some activity. As part of their contract with Sunkist, the pickers from Mexico were given a hot lunch in the orchard each day. Since I wasn't a migrant, I wasn't supposed to get any of this food. But the men would insist that I eat. They didn't get extra food because I was there, but they shared what they had. To them, it was ridiculous for me to decline. Now, I didn't actually need their food. I could easily have brought food from home each day. But I felt joy in being included. These men and boys who worked alongside me felt joy in including me in their meal. And it gave me a taste for something quite a bit spicier than my mother's baloney and cheese on white.

We are all here this Sunday morning to share the joy of praising God. This isn't some new modern, popular twist on the ritual of the Sunday service. This sense of simple joy was at the core of the earliest church services. In the centuries immediately following the resurrection of Jesus, Christians were in the process of developing their self-identity. These early Christians formed informal house churches; they would meet in small groups and share meals, and pray and sing together. There were no dedicated church buildings, no organs or pianos (sorry, Tim),

no spires or bell towers, no special clothes for the pastor, and in fact, at first, no pastor at all. They were simply there to share the joy of gathering in God's name.

What about today? We follow in this tradition of joy, but we have our own special tradition of joy. In the 1700's, the Methodist movement was formed. Its spiritual leader was John Wesley. Wesley's sermons were widely published and read. They are still in print today. In one of them he says: "*All worldly joys are less than that one joy of doing kindness.*" Notice the contrast between "worldly" joys and that "one joy of doing kindness". Bringing joy by showing kindness to our family members, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in this church, or to complete strangers brings us a very special joy, one that expresses our faith in God.

The United Methodist Church, along with its predecessors in the Methodist movement, have a long tradition of small churches. I hope someday to serve a small church in Colorado. This is because a small church provides an environment that makes it easy to grow close to one's fellow congregants. It's a perfect setting for feeling the faith-building joy of bringing joy to others.

This church right here is a great place for nurturing joy.

As you go out into the world today and for the rest of the week, look for opportunities to bring joy to others, perhaps through acts of kindness. Maybe there is a person with whom you have had a shaky relationship at work or in the neighborhood or in the church. Surprise that person with something simple. Performing a task for them. Doing a favor. Or just being friendly. Try looking at life from that person's perspective. How many of us could easily name a couple of people who, if they simply displayed friendship with us or trust in us, would bring us

joy? And don't forget that you can immediately feel the joy of doing something for that other person.

And offer up the joy you receive to God and to Jesus Christ. Offer it up in the name of God's people, of all people. Because in God's eyes, we are all equals. No matter what we believe, where we live, what language we speak, whether we live in a mansion or in a cardboard box under an overpass, whether we are privileged or marginalized, we are all God's people. We are all completely equal.

There are people in the world who don't seem to know this one big, important rule of God's – that we are all God's children. And this is crux of Jesus's teachings about joy and humility: we must wish joy for every human.

I'd like to end with a prayer.

God, we thank you for your grace, which acts within us every day and every night of our lives. It's there when our faith is fervent. It's there when we are in the depths of our greatest doubt. It's there in all its fullness when we are sure there cannot be any God. And it is your grace that gives us the greatest joy by renewing our faith.

We ask that you give us the strength to serve those around us, not simply because it brings us joy. And not simply because it is what you expect from us. We know that by receiving unexpected love, non-believers sometimes come to realize that they are loved by you, God. It brings them closer to you. Spreading the joy that comes with knowing you, loving you, and having total faith in you is the greatest joy that we can receive.

Amen.