

December 15, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### The Christian's Joyful Life

It starts with repentance

It shows in your calling

“A Christmas Carol,” by Charles Dickens is arguable one of the most beloved Christmas stories in our culture. Twenty-one movies have been made of the story. As you well know, Ebenezer Scrooge was a terribly grumpy man. He only cared about himself and his money. On Christmas Eve night, though, he was visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Scrooge realized that his life was miserable and he was headed towards a miserable death. He was terrified. When he woke up on Christmas morning, he was absolutely thrilled to be alive and have a chance to change his life for the better. He ran through the streets shouting, “Merry Christmas.” He donated to charity. He bought a large goose for his employee, Bob Cratchit, and gave him a raise. From then on, Scrooge treated everyone with kindness, generosity and compassion.

No one forced Scrooge to give to charity or be kind to others. He acted differently because he had a change of heart. He was filled with joy to be alive. Christians also have a joyful life. I am not suggesting that you run through the streets shouting, “Merry Christmas.” By a joyful life I mean a life of faith, a sense of sincere satisfaction and extreme contentment. You have a reason to give thanks and smile each day. It starts with repentance and it shows in your calling.

#### It starts with repentance

Last Sunday, we met John the Baptizer who was urging people to repent – to turn away from their sins and turn toward their Savior for salvation. This morning, we hear the rest of John’s sermon. People were going to him to be baptized and he replied (:7), **“You brood of vipers (‘You baby snakes! You followers of Satan!’) Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”** Yikes. That’s not the normal way for a pastor to respond to someone who asks to be baptized. He continued (:9), **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”** And later (:17), **“[God] will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”** That is, “If you are not walking with the Lord, you will end up in hell.”

Those are scary words of warning. Because we still have a sinful nature that sucks us into sin day after day, we always need to hear that warning so we do not get lazy in our faith life. We want to make sure that we live a life of repentance. John also knew that a lot of the people who came to be baptized, especially the religious leaders, were coming for the wrong reason. It was the popular thing to do. They wanted to look holy, but they were trusting in the fact that they were Jews – descendants of Abraham – and they did what Jews were supposed to do by eating kosher and worshipping at the temple, yada, yada, yada. They were trusting in their heritage and good works. For their own sake, John slaps down that idea.

John also shared good news. It was not too late for them to be saved. John compared sinners to diseased trees ready to be cut down. Although God’s ax of judgment was already at the root of the tree – like a lumberjack lining up his ax before he chops – God had not yet cut down the sinners. Each day of our life is another day to look to Jesus. Instead of chopping us down, God swung the ax of his justice at another tree planted on Calvary’s hill. Instead of throwing us in the fire, Jesus was thrown into the fire as he hung on the cross and was forsaken by God. Since Jesus already passed through the judgment and rose again, you will not be judged. You will not be burned up. Your sins are forgiven. God will gather you into heaven the way a farmer joyfully gathers wheat into his barn at the harvest.

John pointed the people, and us, to Jesus who was true God, far greater than John. John said that he, a special prophet of the Lord, was not even worthy to do the servant’s job of washing Jesus’ feet. In last week’s gospel lesson, we heard that John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John baptized with water, which gives the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus is the one who gives baptism its power. Without Jesus who lived, died and rose for us, baptism is just wasted water and words. John said that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit with fire which he did on that first Pentecost. Jesus continues to send the Holy Spirit through word and Sacrament to forgive, to bless, to save. Luke comments (:18), **“With many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.”**

Just as Scrooge was thrilled to still be alive, our hearts leap for joy to know that we are spiritually alive. We know Jesus as our Savior. You and God are good. You know that he is smiling on you, that he is hearing and answering all your prayers, that he is working all things together for your good, that he is sending angels to guard and keep you, that he is

preparing a place for you in heaven. Life on this earth might not be treating you so well right now. You may face pains and problems, hardships and heartaches, but you still have a joyful life. Through faith, you have sincere satisfaction and extreme contentment that Jesus loves you and already saved you. What more could we hope for? That gives us greater joy than any Christmas decorations or treats or gifts. Even through our struggles and sorrows, we can live a joyful life.

#### It shows in your calling

One summer morning, a woman stepped out on her front porch to get her morning newspaper and was shocked. Someone stole her bench. There was no way the police could track it down. A few years later on another summer morning, the same lady stepped out on her porch to get her newspaper and was shocked to see the bench returned. There was a note taped to it which said, "A few years ago, I stole your bench. I'm sorry. Since then, I have become a Christian. I am glad to know that Jesus forgives me. I want to live a Christian life and so I am returning your bench. God bless." No one forced or threatened that person to return the bench. His heart was changed and so his behavior changed. A Christian's joy shows in our lives, in our callings, in what we do.

Although most of the Jews rejected Jesus, there were a good number who were touched by John's message. They realized their sin and rejoiced to hear that the promised Messiah was coming to be their Savior. They asked John (:10), "**What should we do then?**" They were not asking what they should do to earn salvation. They rejoiced that they were already saved. Now they were asking how they could best express their joy and thanks to God, in their daily life, in their calling

Even some tax collectors and soldiers asked John what they should do. Tax collectors were known for getting rich by taking a healthy cut out of the taxes they collected from the poor. Soldiers were known for using their power to take advantage of others and get whatever they wanted. Through John's preaching, the Holy Spirit brought them to faith! They realized that money and power did not give lasting contentment and peace. That's a point America really needs to learn.

As people asked John what to do, he did not tell them to leave their families and farms and fields and become pastors or teachers or missionaries or to give all their money to the church. He did not tell them to give up their jobs as tax-collectors or soldiers. He told them to put their faith into practice where they were in life. In summary, he said, "If you see

someone who is hungry or cold, give him some food or clothes. Do not take advantage of anyone. Be honest at your job. Be kind to everyone all the time."

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. What is your calling? Where are you in life right now? If you are a worker, be the best worker you can be. If you are a student, be the best student you can be. If you are a church member, be the best church member you can be and support the ministry with your prayers offerings and efforts. If you are a retiree, be the best retiree you can be. If you stole someone's bench, return it. If you sinned against someone, apologize. If someone sins against you, forgive as you have been forgiven. Love your wife. Respect your husband. Care for your children and grandchildren. Lend a helping hand to your neighbor. Encourage one another. Pray often. Worship sincerely. Do whatever you can wherever God has placed you at this point in your life. You can not do everything for everyone. The Lord knows that and does not expect that. But everyone can do something to put their faith into practice.

There's probably something in everyone's life that we wish was different. Yet, in his wisdom, God has placed us where we are with what we have because that's where he wants us to shine our light of faith at this point in time. Every morning you wake up you can be joyful, even if you aren't feeling that well. Joyfulness is not a giddy and giggly emotion. Joyfulness comes from Christ assuring you of his abiding love and your glorious future. The happiness of "holiday cheer" is fickle and fleeting. Once the holiday music stops and the tree is gone and the presents are put away, life goes back to the daily grind. Joyfulness is enduring. What a joy to know that God loves you and you are going to heaven. What a joy to know that until you get to heaven, your life has meaning and purpose as the Lord uses you as his hands, face, and voice to help and encourage others and share his love. You get to be "Jesus" to someone. How cool! Fellow Christian, rejoicing in your salvation, live a joyful life. Amen.