

“Rebirth: Ongoing Conversion”
“The Unifying And Transforming Power Of The Spirit”
Numbers 11:24-30
Psalm 104:24-35
1 Corinthians 12:3-13
John 7:37-39

Joy is an outcome of gratitude. And joy results from the unifying and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. One experiences joy in their union in Christ. And that is transformative. Chris Anderson, the lyricist for all of our commissioned hymns writes this verse and refrain in *May They See Christ*, “Joy of God, sustain and cheer me, Undiminished by life’s woes. Though my barns be full or empty, I’ll rejoice in God alone. Spirit, grow your fruit within me, Pruning me of selfish strife—May your virtues so define me That those watching see but Christ.”¹ Larry Reed relates the following real-life experience regarding a ministry he and his wife started to bring the joy of God to their neighborhood:

My wife and I have found a simple program that lets us reach out to our neighbors and helps feed the hungry at the same time. It’s called “Neighborhood Connections Thru Canning Hunger.” It allows us to gradually build relationships with our neighbors by visiting them every two months to collect goods for people who are hungry. First, we prayer-walk the streets, asking that God will move our hearts to be broken for these neighbors. Then we leave a door hanger at each home saying that we are helping to feed hungry kids and their families in our area. It says that we will be stopping by on a certain date to collect non-perishable food items, and will deliver them immediately to a local food bank. We include our names and address, along with a list of needed items and a packet of information about the program and the needs of the hungry. On the specified date, we return to the house and knock on the door. We introduce ourselves and say we have come to collect the food. This gives us a chance to meet our neighbors face to face. After that, we go back every two months. When a neighbor has donated a third time, we say: “Thanks again. By the way, at our church we pray for families who receive this food, and we also pray for the families that give it. Is there anything we can pray about for you or your family?” After a year of working this program, we had a neighborhood Christmas party where the gospel was presented. We asked people if they would be interested in a

¹Chris Anderson, *May They See Christ*, verse two and refrain from the commissioned hymn of the same name commissioned by Geneva Presbyterian Church, May 2017.

neighborhood Bible study, and nearly everyone showed interest. It resulted in a men's Bible study that became evangelistic. We saw people come to Christ. My family and I have just moved into a new neighborhood. We have little doubt that God has moved us into this neighborhood to once again make connections that will help feed stomachs that are hungry for food—and fill hearts that are hungry for Jesus Christ.²

And that ability to be vulnerable to life's woes, yet anchored in joy, led Larry and his wife to bring the joy of God to their neighborhood.

Pentecost, is the time in the Church Year when we remember the ongoing vulnerability of God to the woes of humanity, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh. I have gratitude which results in joy for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This empowerment transformed the nature of Jesus' earthly ministry. God was now present within everyone who believed in Jesus. Jesus' ministry was multiplied one thousand-fold... ten thousand-fold... within the first year following his ascension. And the Holy Spirit continues to be present with all followers of Jesus today. Again, we claim the refrain of our commissioned hymn as our own this Pentecost, "Spirit, grow your fruit within me, pruning me of selfish strife. May your virtues so define me that those watching see but Christ."³ By faith in Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God and one another. Our names were known by God from the very beginning. We cannot understand this with our heads alone. We cannot understand this even with our hearts. To understand and experience this, you and I must affirm our union with Jesus Christ and enter into that mystery. We have unity with Jesus and fellow followers of Jesus. Jesus is alive in us and lives his life in and through us for the sake of others. We are grateful and filled with joy.⁴

Numbers 11:24-30, Psalm 104:24-35, 1 Corinthians 12:3-13, and John 7:37-39 are clear

²Larry Reed, "Opening Doors in Our Neighborhoods," *Decision* (April 2006); ©2006 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, used by permission, all rights reserved.

³Chris Anderson, *May They See Christ*, the refrain from the hymn commissioned by Geneva Presbyterian Church, May 2017.

⁴Some ideas in this paragraph are gleaned from a Mass presided over by Pope Francis on October 17, 2014, in the chapel of Santa Marta.

that God is always present even when we sense God's absence. We gain a truer experience of living through self-sacrifice. And a proper use of power is gained through vulnerability. Unity and transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit is the outcome.

John 7:37-39 reiterates the three themes in John's gospel. The good news of Jesus is: presence through absence, life through death, power through vulnerability.⁵ Are you thirsty? Jesus cries out for our attention. Every story of human trafficking; every act of terrorism; every person asking for food; every homeless encampment; and every family living at the Tijuana city dump...Jesus is crying out, "If you love me be my presence. If you love me, be my life. If you love me, be my power." Anyone can believe in Jesus. And when someone believes, Jesus meets them and quenches that thirst for meaning, purpose, and significance. And out of that quenched thirst comes a life overflowing with rivers of living water. The Spirit has come. God lives within us. Believe. If you love Jesus, then experience joy as you address the woes of life.⁶

Might you agree that our lack of joy is rooted in our fear of vulnerability? Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching, Candler School of Theology at Emory University writes, "The shock of the Christian life is that the glorified Jesus has once again, through the Spirit, become flesh in the lives of believers, and the result is not that Jesus has become confined in the small space of believers' hearts, but that the lives of believers have become like his—large and life giving, 'rivers of living waters.'"⁷ When we look to Jesus to meet our deepest thirsts, as

⁵Stephen B. Boyd in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 20.

⁶In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Bradley E. Schmeling, Jennifer L. Lord, Gail Ramshaw, Greg Cootsona, Heidi Haverkamp, Martha C. Highsmith, and Kira Schlesinger as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 318-320, 320-321, 322-323, 324-326, 326-327, 328-330, and 330-332.

⁷Thomas G. Long in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, 25.

opposed to the dry wells that the world offers, our needs are met and our identity in Jesus strengthened.⁸ “Joy of God, sustain and cheer me, undiminished by life’s woes. Though my barns be full or empty, I’ll rejoice in God alone.”⁹ The gift of the Holy Spirit changes everything. On Pentecost, the church celebrates its beginning as a united, transformative community of faith. We can each recommit to the mission of being “for” Christ and not just against what we see as being wrong in the world. Come Holy Spirit, come! Amen.

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 28 May 2023 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh
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⁸For more insight on how to avoid drinking from dry wells, read Thomas G. Long in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, 21, 23, 25.

⁹Chris Anderson, *May They Know Christ*, verse two from the hymn commissioned by Geneva Presbyterian Church, May 2017.