

## ***Fullness of Joy***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Stewardship Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
November 15, 2015  
Text: Psalm 16

Joy is an elusive thing. True joy, that sense of happiness and excitement so profound that you feel you're going to burst because of it, is just not something we experience that often. Life is too busy or too predictable or too anxiety filled or too ordinary most of the time so joy just keeps its distance. Or perhaps we push it away with our worries and the realities of everyday life that tend to dominate our waking hours. True too is that we live in anxious times, when violence explodes unpredictably in places where personal well-being should be the taken-for-granted norm – like an elementary school in Connecticut or a church in North Carolina or a sidewalk café in Paris. The simple truth of our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives is that joy eludes us far too much of the time, replaced increasingly with fears and worries and anxieties.

This is very situation of joy being chased out of one's life by fears and anxieties and worry is precisely what Psalm 16 is talking about. This beautiful psalm in fact encourages us to reach beyond the fears and anxieties of life each day and toward the God who loves us beyond all human understanding. Biblical scholar Beth Tanner encourages us to find in this psalm a mandate to “trust in the Lord and ignore those who say otherwise.” Trust in the Lord

and ignore those who say otherwise. Move beyond fear and worry and anxiety to trust in God to carry you forward, to set those boundary lines of your life in pleasant places somehow, someday. Trust God when the world tells you not to, especially when the world tells you not to. Trust God when your head tells you to be afraid but your heart says “I don’t want to live in fear and worry anymore.” Trust the Lord and ignore those who say otherwise! This is the first step on the pathway that leads to fullness of joy in your life.

The thing is, though, you have to choose to invite God to be part of your life. “The Lord is my chosen portion” the psalmist says. *My chosen* portion! God does not insinuate God-self into your life. God’s there always, to be sure. God is not leaving you alone, hanging out there twisting in the wind when you most need to feel God’s love and presence in your life. But, here’s the thing – you have to make the effort to acknowledge God, to reach for God, to dare to believe that you matter to God just as you are, just where you are in your life. God is there for you, reaching out to you but it’s always up to you to reach back.

That you do matter to God is evident, the psalmist says, when you look at your life. “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places” the psalmist says. Oh sure, there are tough times, difficult situations, worrisome things happening in my life all the time. God’s presence in my life is not a brick wall that

prevents stuff from happening to me. That's not what those boundary lines are for. Instead, those boundary lines falling in pleasant places are the framework for living the life that is God's gift to us when we dare to invite God into our lives. That framework for living life each day emerges when we take the time to rest in God's presence in prayer, whatever that might look like for us. That framework becomes visible when we make time for God in spite of all the other stuff going on in our lives. In other words, that framework – those God given boundaries the psalmist is talking about – provides the superstructure of our lives when we allow it to. When we find it within ourselves to trust the Lord is always with us no matter what, we know we shall not be moved no matter what life throws at us.

A key point here is recognizing that God's boundary lines for us are not walls to keep the world away from us. Rather, they are the framework through which God invites us, encourages us, expects us, to work for the change the world needs. By seeing where God's boundaries are, we are empowered to discern, to understand, the difference between God's boundaries, God's framework for the living of life each day, and the human ones the world tries to cram down our throats all the time. The world's framework says life is fear-filled and anxiety producing because that's just the way things are. Be afraid, the media tells us all the time. Be afraid, be cautious, expect the worst, protect yourself at

all costs! But those don't sound like boundary lines in pleasant places to me. Those don't sound like any way to live my life, this precious gift of God I have the chance to renew every day.

So, back to this whole joy thing. Where do we find joy in our lives? How do we find joy in our lives? How are God's boundaries, God's framework for our lives part of this expectation of, this hope for, joy? Simple, the psalmist says. God's boundaries, God's framework for our lives, when we open ourselves to its real presence and possibility for us, is the path to God's presence – God's living, tangible, hope-filled, anxiety banishing reality – and that's where we find fullness of joy. Well, yeah but, we think. Yeah but, I've had moments of joy that God wasn't part of. I've had those moments and I don't recall a profound sense of God. I was just, you know – joyful.

Maybe. Maybe not. I think it all comes down to how you define joy, how you see joy as different from, distinct in its own right from happiness and contentment even in their most extreme forms. That's what makes all this so challenging to see, to understand, to process in our heads and hearts. Joy – true boundless joy that bursts into your head and heart – is always transcendent. It always moves you deeply, from where you were before that joyful moment, to who you've become in its aftermath. That moment when a spectacular sunset carries you completely out of yourself and into a whole new sense of your place in the

universe – that’s the fullness of joy the psalmist is talking about. That moment when you hold your newborn baby and sense in her the real miracle of life exploding in your heart – that’s the fullness of joy that changes you forever. These joy-filled moments are rare and precious, so much so that we are changed forever when they happen. They leave us different than we were before, because in them we sense God’s reality in our lives, if only for a split second. These moments of fullness of joy the psalmist is talking about are the bridge between what we envision for ourselves and what God wants for us, intends for us. They are the lens through which God and God’s plan for our lives become visible, if only for a moment. And then what?

That’s the tough part of all of this! Discerning, figuring out, living into reality God’s framework for our lives – those boundary lines falling in pleasant places – is not easy, or simple. In fact, it’s incredibly difficult because the world in which we live is always telling us its truth is more real, more urgent, more important than God’s reality. The world in which we live is relentless in its messages of fear and limited resources leading to limited lives. The world in which we live tells us all the time that less is the operative word for our lives each day. Do more with fewer resources at work. Hold on to every dollar because you never know when you might come up short. Time is money so for heaven’s sake, don’t waste time! Less is more, unless of course

you already have more than most. Then more is more. And more. And the heck with the other guy.

These are the realities of life each day. We know it. We see it on the news. We read about it in magazines, in books, even on-line. These boundaries of life are not the pleasant ones God's promises, not the ones the psalmist describes so beautifully. So, what are we to do? How do we live in this in-between place where God says one thing and the world says another? Enter the church, God's Beloved community of people coming together each week is the antidote to the relentless onslaught of the world's godless, restrictive frameworks for life and their continual messages of fear and scarcity and pain and relentless anxiety. The church, dear friends, is the gift of God to the people of God trying to live lives in a frightening, hostile and mean-spirited world. Here is where we come to remind ourselves that God wants good for us, and for the world in which we live. Here is where we come to heal each other when hearts and souls and psyches are battered by the whims and vagaries of 21<sup>st</sup> century life. The church, dear friends, is what allows us to find together those God-given, God-intended boundary lines falling in pleasant places. We help each other find them, when the world obscures them from our sight. We bind up each other's wounds. We sing and pray and reconnect with God through each other and the common lot we share as God's people in this place. And as we do, our hearts once again can be open to

the fullness of joy God wants for us, God promises to us. Here in this place, God's house, this church is where we construct together the future God intends for us, the present God wants for us, both of them built on the goodly heritage our ancestors in this place gave to us through their blood, sweat and tears.

Fullness of joy. It is possible! It is what God wants for us. It is what God gifts to us. And when we accept that gift, as God wants us to do, we also accept the responsibility that comes with it. And part of that responsibility is simple – to make sure this church, this place where we come together as the people of God trying to figure out God's plan for our lives – continues to be here to do God's work in the world. That is our goal this Stewardship Sunday and every Sunday. This church needs to continue to be here, dear friends, and she needs resources to be what we know her to be – a beacon of hope to our community and the world. The church needs to be here for people battered by the world, for people grieving loved ones lost, for people anxious to learn more of God and how to make a difference in God's world. The church – *this church* – must be here in the years ahead so that fullness of joy as God always intended it for God's beloved people – doesn't just slip away, buried by an avalanche of the relentless fear and scarcity the world professes as truth.

So, dear friends, members of our Stewardship Committee are now going to be handing out pledge cards for you to take a

moment and fill out for us this morning. Pledges are important for our Trustees and Treasurers to have in hand so they know how to plan for the year ahead. We know for those of you who are also supporting the Capital Campaign through pledges that an increase in your regular pledge this year is probably too much to ask. But we do hope you will at least hold steady in what you have given in the past. For those of you who are new to the church and those of you who are not supporting the Capital Campaign for whatever reason, we hope you will make a pledge for the first time or increase your existing pledge so that all the work, all the ministry, God needs this church to do will continue. Some of our leaders have already made their pledges to demonstrate for you their commitment to this church. Through their efforts we have already raised \$\_\_\_\_\_ for the 2016 budget and we thank them for their leadership.

So, now's your chance to step up to support this church, stepping out in faith as you do. We'll take a few moments now for you to fill out the pledge cards. [Pause] Now, while we are singing our hymn of response to the sermon, you are invited to bring those pledge cards forward and place them in the basket on the altar to be dedicated and blessed. Let us continue with the singing of our hymn, #174 (*Renew!*) – “Lord of All Hopefulness.”