

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

## “RESTORING OUR JOY”

Psalms 51:12 “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

Last week I told you about how I learned to skate. My first experience on the ice was not a happy one. But after a few more tries I got it. Today I want to tell you about a much more recent experience. Right after Christmas I bought myself a pair of new skates. It was the first new skates I’ve owned in 45 years. The old ones had served me well. But whenever I took them for sharpening in recent years, or when I went skating someone would inevitably say, “Wow, those are some ancient blades you’ve got there. Right out of the stone age.” That made me feel pretty ancient myself. Besides, there wasn’t much blade left to sharpen. Furthermore, the lining on the inside of the boots had pretty much worn away, so they were no longer very comfortable. It doesn’t help that I am flat-footed. So I bought myself a new pair of Bauer skates. I really enjoy skating in them. They are much lighter than the old skates. Almost every Friday morning I’ve been going to the Meadowvale 4 Arena for the Adult skate. I’ve been rediscovering the joy of skating.

It’s good for us to rediscover the joy in familiar things. It’s like when you go back and listen to a favourite recording you haven’t heard for a while. You realize why you liked it so much in the first place. So it can be with our Christian faith.

Now joy is very much a part of the Christian faith. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but he also knew joy. He took joy in God’s creation and in the company of his friends. He rejoiced in the victories which he and his disciples won over the power of evil. In the Upper Room, on the eve of his death, Jesus said to his disciples, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” And Paul, in listing the fruits of the Holy Spirit, lists love first, followed by joy.

But sometimes we miss the joy of the Christian faith. There are times when our faith feels heavy and burdensome, like skating in old leather skates with dull blades. And we cry out to God, in David’s words, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” When King David wrote those words in Psalm 51 his joy was at a low ebb. He just wasn’t feeling it. We know why. It was because of his sin with Bathsheba and subsequently arranging for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. So he poured out his sin before God and begged God for mercy. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.” And then in verse 12, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

Now we are not David and our sin may not be as severe as his, but we are all sinners who fall short of God’s glory. And our joy can dry up because of unconfessed sin. But there are other reasons, too. Maybe serving the Lord has worn you out. Maybe you’ve forgotten that “it is by

grace that we are saved through faith, and not through works." Or maybe you've slipped back into thinking that the Christian faith is stern and unyielding and legalistic, like a straightjacket. It can happen. So we pray, "Restore to us the joy of faith. Help us to experience the life of faith with more freedom and enthusiasm." And surely it's a prayer that God answers. God's Holy Spirit blows towards us, restoring our joy. It's happening today. God's Spirit is blowing toward us, restoring in you and in me, the joy of our holy faith.

*First, God's Spirit is restoring in us the joy of salvation.*

In Jesus' famous parable, the father saw the son returning, even while the son was still far off. Filled with compassion the Father ran out to embrace his son. In Middle Eastern culture, it was humiliating for the father, the head of the household, to be seen running. But this father didn't care what the neighbours thought. He accepted the boy back not as a servant for hire, but as a son. He put the best robe on him. He slaughtered the fatted calf and ordered a celebration. He said, "This son of mine who was dead is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate. Both father and son knew great joy.

One of North America's finest preachers is Dr. Fred Craddock, from the southern United States. Fred Craddock tells a story from his teenage years. He and some fellows were working at a wooden box factory, and one day they went downtown for lunch. They all had their nail aprons on. On the street, they passed a blind man on the sidewalk with a guitar and a tin cup and a sign that read, "I'm blind, please help me." Well, the three of them decided they were going to play a trick on this man, so they reached into their aprons and took out several nails, and each of them very noisily dropped them into his tin cup. The blind man said, "Thank you, thank you very much. May God bless you. Thank you very much."

Craddock said that that incident ate at him - it had been an ugly thing to do, and he could not forget it. So he went to his youth pastor and told her about it. She said that it was, indeed, a terrible thing to do, and that she felt the pain of it even as he did. Then she said, "God forgives you for that, but why don't you, next week, go to that same blind man and tell him what you did, and ask him to forgive you, and then, if you have a nickel or a dime or a quarter, give it to him." That is what he did, and the poor man forgave him. "I know how it is," he said. "Lots of boys are full of mischief." Craddock says that a great burden was lifted. His spirit felt light again. He walked to work with a spring in his step. He knew the joy of God's salvation.

We have all given nails to others; in fact, we gave nails to Jesus when he was crucified on a cross. God in Christ was stripped naked and humiliated before the world. And we are all guilty. Yet that awful deed was the very source of our salvation. Because the Crucified One was raised from the dead we know his word is true. The work of our salvation is done. We have been saved from perishing in our sin, forever apart from God. We have been delivered unto new and eternal life with God. And God did it at great and unfathomable cost to himself. There is nothing we have to do other than accept with by faith what God has done for us. Our God is a compassionate God who runs out and embraces us, whenever we turn to him. God sees the raggedy robes of sin we are wearing. But he removes them and covers us with the righteous robes of his Son. Through faith in the Christ who told this parable we are forgiven and free. The burden is lifted. We share

Christ's victory over sin and evil and death. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love. Our Father takes great joy in us his children, and we can take joy in who God is and what he has done for us.

Jesus' parable has been read. And today God's Holy Spirit is blowing towards us, restoring the joy of our salvation.

*Secondly, God's Spirit is restoring in us the joy of worship.*

The Psalmist writes in Psalm 122 verse 1, 'I rejoiced when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."' What joy there is in being in God's house. What joy there is in worshipping God. Jesus said to Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Now we may not always sense that joy. Sometimes it is just easier to sleep in on Sunday mornings. Getting the children ready for Sunday School can be a challenge. The prospect of going to the house of the Lord may seem burdensome. Worship seems like a chore not a delight.

But God's Spirit is giving us a new perspective on the value of worship. Here we meet and experience the presence of the living God. Here we get a new perspective on life. Here we see that our problems may not be quite as large as we think. Here in God's presence a way forward may come to you that you had not thought of before. Here in the Father's house you know that you don't have to face anything alone, because God is with you and because you are part of a supportive, caring fellowship of people. Now if you come to church problem free that's great, but just by being here you are strengthening and encouraging someone else. Here in the Father's house we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Here in worship our thoughts are lifted from earth to heaven. Here we are reminded that we are children of the living God, heirs of eternal life. Here we know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Here we are guided and formed by God's word. Here in God's house we receive the divine grace which heals our wounds and lifts our burdens.

Sometimes people say to me, "When I got up this morning I didn't feel like coming to church. But I'm so glad I did." I'm happy to hear that. My goal as worship leader and preacher is that coming to God's house will be a positive experience for all of us. God's Spirit is blowing towards us today, restoring in us the joy of worship. God's Spirit is helping us to say with the Psalmist, 'I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."'

*Finally, God's Spirit is restoring in us the joy of service.*

Jesus said of himself, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." As followers of Jesus, we too are servants, servants of God, servants of his Kingdom, servants of the church, servants to one another. Now I know that serving can sometimes seem burdensome, rather than joyful. We're can be like the older brother in the parable who had lost his joy. He felt like a slave rather than the son of a father who had given him everything. So we need God to restore our joy in serving.

A mother planted a beautiful flower garden. One day her daughter went to the flower garden, picked a petunia, placed it in a vase and gave it to her mother as a gift. Mother was overjoyed, even though Mother herself had made the gift possible. So it is with our service. We do not serve to save ourselves. Our salvation has already been secured by God in Jesus Christ. Our service does not gain heaven, because heaven has already been gained for us. Our service expresses gratitude for who God is, what he has done for us and what he has promised to us. His gifts make our service possible and he is overjoyed with our efforts. Our joy in serving is restored by realizing that we are returning to God what he has already planted in us. Of course, we've all been given different gifts but when we use them and work together we discover joy in serving. Paul tells us, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Furthermore, our service helps keep the doors open and the home fires burning. And when someone comes home to the Father's loving embrace, we can rejoice with them, just as God does.

Today God's Spirit is blowing towards us, restoring our joy - the joy of our salvation, the joy of worship, the joy of serving. God is sustaining us with a willing spirit. So let us, you and I, hear and heed the apostle's call, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice."