

“Joy” A sermon by Bill Chadwick
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Bloomington, MN September 9, 2018

“Oak Grove is a joyful, inclusive, compassionate community seeking to do justice, act mercifully, and walk humbly with God.”

This spring the program staff—Mary, Nathan, Judy and I—developed this statement, which was affirmed by the session. It’s not meant to replace the very concise “Loving God...Changing Lives,” but to be an addition to it. This new statement is also brief and we believe you will find it easy to memorize.

Of course, some of you will recognize the latter half of it as coming from the prophet Micah. Chapter 6 verse 8.

*And what does the Lord require of you?
To do justice, to act mercifully,
and to walk humbly with your God.*

Over the next couple of months we will explore this new vision statement a word or phrase at a time. Today: Joy

Joy, or its variants “joyful,” joyfulness,” “joyous,” is found 267 times. The Bible is all about joy.

You wouldn’t know that by looking at some congregations. A number of years ago our family worshipped one Sunday in a large Presbyterian congregation in a magnificent Gothic cathedral in another city. Everything was very Presbyterian ‘decent and orderly.’”

And boring. As we left I realized that in that hour-long worship service I did not once laugh, or even smile. Now, worship isn’t supposed to be stand-up comedy, but good heavens, we are gathered to bring praise to the One who created this amazing world, including the duck-billed platypus, praise to the One who has given us all good things, including Jesus, our loved ones, music and art and sex; who goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death; and, in fact, defeated evil and death in the resurrection of Jesus. All those realities should cause us in our worship to at least smile...Amen?

There's a very telling quote in one of John Steinbeck's books, *East of Eden*: "He brought with him his tiny Irish wife, a tight, hard little woman, humorless as a chicken, with a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly anything that was pleasant to do."

Ouch! "A dour Presbyterian mind."

A few years back friends of mine moved from one side of the Twin Cities to another and they went searching for a new church. Each week they went to a different church. As they came out of worship in one particular congregation, as they were exiting the sanctuary, their five year-old son commented, "God doesn't live here." And he was right. I knew that congregation. It was fractured and fractious.

What about us? Oak Grove is not a perfect congregation. Its pastors are not perfect people. But both the congregation and pastors are joyful.

I could give dozens of examples. Here are just two.

A few of you participated in the wonderful intergenerational mission trip to St. Louis in March. You worked hard. And you reported that you were tired. Really tired. But a good tired. In the Bible that's called Joy. Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Isn't that true? That we usually have more fun in giving than in getting?

How many times have you heard people remark following some mission trip or service project, "I went there to serve others, but I got way more out of it than they did"?

Dr. John Anderson of our congregation taught in the Carlson School of Business for many years. A few years ago he retired and he had time to use his gift of music. He began to volunteer playing the piano in the lobby of the University Hospital a couple hours two days a week.

He reports that when they hear the music, people stop crying, bent over old men walk more upright. One couple had just heard good medical news and when they came to the lobby, they asked John to play a waltz and they began to dance in celebration, and they were met with applause. And then there was one little girl, who came over to the piano while John was playing and

put her head against the side of the instrument and she smiled broadly. Her mother explained that the little girl was deaf, but when she put her head against the piano she could “hear” the vibrations of the music, and she loved it. John brings happiness to so many, but he at the same time receives much joy. I’ve known John to be kind of a reticent person, but when I called to ask him if I could tell his story in my sermon I couldn’t get off the phone; not that I wanted to. It was so fun to hear the joy in his voice.

I am going to ask you two questions. Think to yourself: First: Where in the life of Oak Grove do you find joy? Second: Where outside Oak Grove do you find joy? Thirty seconds to think. No talking. Now, if you are willing, you don’t have to, I’m going to invite you to break into groups of three, or two or four. Preferably people you didn’t come to church with. Groups of three. Share your answers briefly: “Where within the life of Oak Grove do you find joy?” “Where outside of Oak Grove do you find joy?” Each person gets 30 seconds total to answer both questions.

Wasn’t that fun? For you introverts, I apologize.

Of course, life isn’t all unicorns and bubble baths. A lot of life is hard, and scary, especially with the current political situation. Let me remind you of this wonderful Biblical promise. In Jesus’ farewell address to his disciples he says this, it’s worth memorizing, John 16:33: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Some of you have heard this story before. My mother-in-law Jean was a sports fanatic. She had season tickets to the Vikings, Gophers football and basketball, watched every Twins game on TV. And she was very interested in winning. One Saturday afternoon I happened to be at Jean’s house and she was engrossed in watching the Gophers men’s hockey team in a furious contest against their most hated rival, North Dakota. The score was tied late in the final period. She was on the edge of her seat as first one team would make a rush and then the other. I sat down to watch with her. I, too, very much wanted the Gophers to win. But as I watched, I was very calm. I’m not always, but in this particular instance I was. Jean was so stressed, intensely watching our goalie fend off a flurry of shots, shoulders slumping when our forwards missed the opponent’s net.

What was the difference between us?

I knew that we were watching a tape of the previous night's game. I had read in the sports pages that the Gophers had won in overtime.

Friends, in life we know who wins. We know who holds history in her hands. We know that on the Cross God defeated evil and death.

We can take joy in the promise of life and love eternal and glad heavenly reunion with those who have gone before.

Love wins. So let us be joyful.

Now sing it with me, at first slowly and softly, "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy..."