

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 10, 2016
Sermon Title: Joy. Period
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Deacon: Lord, when your words came I ate them; they were my JOY and heart's delight. (Jeremiah 15:16)

Congregation: I have told you so that my JOY may be in you and that your JOY may be complete. (Jesus, John 15:11)

Deacon: I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul REJOICES in God. (Isaiah 61:10)

Congregation: Ask and you shall receive, and your JOY will be complete. (Jesus, John 17:13)

Deacon: Be JOYful in hope, patient in affliction . . . be JOYful always; pray continually. (Romans 12:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Congregation: Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of JOY. (Psalm 126) Weeping may remain for a night; REJOICING comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

Deacon: The fruit of the Spirit is JOY . . . (Galatians 5:22)

Congregation: REJOICE in the Lord always; and again I say REJOICE. (Philippians 4:4)

Deacon: REJOICE that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be OVERJOYED when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:13)

Congregation: Though you have not seen Christ, you love him and believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious JOY. (1 Peter 1:8)

Deacon: Go and ENJOY choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing . . . for the JOY of the Lord is your strength. (Nehemiah 8:10)

All Together: Share in the JOY of your nation (Psalm 106:5) . . . tell of God's work with songs of JOY (Psalm 107:22)

. . . a cheerful look brings JOY (Proverbs 15:30)
. . . shout aloud and sing for JOY (Isaiah 12:6)
. . . may the God of hope fill you with all JOY
(Romans 15:13)
. . . for what is our hope, our JOY? Is it not You?
You are our glory and JOY. (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20)

There's an odd story in the Bible about Jesus refusing a mother's request to help her sick child. Jesus is actually calling her a dog (Mark 7:25-30), but the mother has such a profound response that Jesus does heal the daughter. For 2,000 years, preachers have tried to explain the story, to excuse Jesus's rude behavior, to let him off the hook. Maybe he was testing the mother's faith. Maybe he really did want to draw a distinction between insiders and outsiders, whom he would help and whom he wouldn't.

But here's another theory: maybe he was just having a bad day. Maybe he was just grumpy. And I mean that seriously. Jesus was under a lot of pressure, constant pressure. From the moment he started his ministry, he was under a microscope. People who loved him swarmed all over him. They didn't have autograph seekers in those days. No one was trying to squeeze in next to him for a selfie or a photobomb. But everybody wanted a piece of him. Mothers brought their kids to be blessed. Friends brought folks to be healed. The demon-possessed cried out for relief. Lepers asked to be cleansed. People hung on his every word. And, from day one, people opposed him, criticized him, watched him, plotted against him, tried to trip him up, ensnare him. Stop him.

The authorities asked, "Who do you think you are?" People in his hometown tried to kill him. To make things tougher, Jesus had nothing. And he was headed to the cross, and he knew it. You get the sense from this Bible story that Jesus needed a break. And once again, he's interrupted. The mother demanding help wasn't even Jewish, wasn't even from Israel, wasn't even one of his own kind. He didn't owe her anything. "There is no rest for the weary." Ever. So Jesus's response is out of character, curt, rude, insulting. Yes, maybe he was grumpy.

As you've heard this morning, we have this group in our church, the "Compassion Group." They spend the year doing simple, nice things for people. A couple of months ago, I met with Brenda and Anne, and they made the observation that January is a bleak month. It's cold, windy, dark, dreary. And the only thing on the horizon is February. Dead Christmas trees are out by the curb. All the decorations are down.

Alida has been in India and is now in China, and when she called from China, she asked what I was doing. I told her I was taking the Christmas stuff down, putting it away, being helpful. "NO!" she practically screamed into the phone, "No, don't put the Christmas decorations away. I don't want to come home to a dreary house!" She left just after Christmas with the whole world still full of Christmas joy. She doesn't want to come back to . . . January. She wants to hold on to the joy a little bit longer.

That was the Compassion Group's idea. Let's turn January into a month of JOY. Let's look for practical, easy, personal ways to practice joy, to be joyful, to bring joy into someone's life, anyone's life, everyone's life. And the good news is that it starts with you. You need joy in your life. It's like peace. Don't we sing, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with ME"? We're not going to get peace from belligerent, nasty, cruel people. We're not going to get joy from grumpy, whiney, hypercritical, joyless people.

By definition, if you are joy/less, you have no joy to share. You have to have something in order to share it. Johnny Appleseed got to be Johnny Appleseed only because he had apple seeds to share. Joyful people have joy to share. All of those Scriptures we read together earlier give us a path to joy. I've always loved that first one: the Prophet Jeremiah says to God, "Lord when your words came, I ate them, they were my joy, my heart's delight!" (Jeremiah 15:16) He loved his Bible so much, the Scriptures, God's words that came to him, so much that he "ate them," he devoured and digested and chewed over God's words; and that brought him "joy . . . delight"!

I came to this church in 1997, and I'd been here about a month when I arranged for a Christian theater group to perform during church. They did a selection of little skits, some a minute or two long, each with a bite, a provocative lesson. One was called "The Evangelist." It took place at a bus stop. People lined up in the cold, waiting for the bus so they can go to work. This Christian guy with a gigantic oversized Bible walks up to them and starts beating them on the head with the Bible, shouting, "God loves you!" A lot of people use the Bible like that, as a weapon, a cudgel, something to beat people up with. Not Jeremiah. Jeremiah found "joy," "heart's delight," hearing God's word.

That's the first place to find our joy, in our relationship with God. That's God's job or church's job, *my* job. If your religious life doesn't include joy, I'm a failure, and you should find another church because life's too short to be stuck in a grumpy church with a grumpy pastor shouting grumpy Scripture. Isaiah "rejoiced in God." (Isaiah 61:10) Jesus wants to give us his joy so that "our joy will be complete." (Job 15:11) Paul urges us to joy even

in the worst of times, look for it, dig for it, find it, hold on to it, it is there, Jesus and Paul both say, it is there if you'll look for it.

And I love that last verse we read together. Paul writes, "For what is our hope, our joy? Is it not you? You are our glory and joy! (1 Thessalonians 2:19-10) I'll bet you thought what I thought, that Paul was talking about God or Jesus. They must be the "you" who brings Paul joy. But no! The "you" Paul is referring to is . . . *you!* He was writing to his church, the people in his church, his church family, and by extension, you, this church, our church family. And he was saying that *we* bring joy!

That's certainly true of my life. I get a one-two punch of joy from God *and* you. It is quite true that God and God's words bring joy into everyday life in a thousand different ways. The right verses, the right teaching, the right belief, the right story for Jesus's life comes along at just the right time, and those words carry a weight, an influence, a power all their own. They help. They save. They really do.

But it's also true that you bring joy into my life every day. Sometimes by what you do. Sometimes by what you say. Sometimes by just who you are. Being around you and knowing what you're like, what you're up to, that brings me joy. This week I've seen nine of our young people in their sports games, and as I watched each one, I realized how much I like them. I like who they are, what they're becoming. And their parents are good folks, doing good stuff, making a difference in life all around. I don't want to sound like the FBI, but I know what you do with your time, your faith. You give me joy!

I went to a girls' basketball game at Greens Farms Academy, playing against St. Luke's. Our church had a girl on each team, and I sat in the stands with their families, gently rooting for each team. As I walked back to my car, I was filled with joy. Yes, real joy. I realized I had married each set of parents. I had baptized each girl. We had confirmed each girl. They are great moms, great dads, great kids. St. Paul is 100 percent right. You, my church, you "give me hope." You "give me joy."

When Alida comes back, she'll have a bunch of great stories from this year's India trip, so I won't steal her thunder. But I'll tell you this. I have spoken to her every day, and every day she is filled with joy because of our church people. She took nine church members with her, adults and teenagers, and it wasn't easy. The world they entered is a tough world, a world of devastation, sickness, poverty; an emotional and physical and spiritual obstacle course—boot camp—that has broken many a person. But every day Alida told me stories about joy, about each of our church people as they

opened their hearts and brought joy to each person they met, each encounter they faced, each obstacle they surmounted.

O.K., God gives us joy. You give me joy. The final part is taking joy out beyond our doors, inviting each of us to turn bleak January into joyful January. And certainly part of that is to be joyful, that's a start, be joyful. That equips you to give joy.

One of our Scriptures we read gives us a pretty good clue about the next step. Remember the verse from Nehemiah? Let me give you some background. At the time of Nehemiah, Israel had been destroyed: conquered, dragged off into slavery, the nation left to rot. But now they were rebuilding. In this election season, we've heard a lot about "making American great again," and each candidate has his or her solution. Well, they would do well to read Nehemiah because his God-given task was to make his nation "great again," and his solution, God's solution, was two-fold: hard work and compassion. Hard work, so you can enjoy the fruits of your labor. And compassion so that no one is left out. The verse we read says, "Go and ENJOY choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing . . . for the JOY of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)

Look at that. It's a complete circle. Enjoy yourself. Bring joy to others. Count on God to keep you joyful. That way it doesn't run out. Let's repeat that. Enjoy yourself, all that "choice food and sweet drink," that party, that feast, that fun, "enjoy!" Then get some of that joy outside, take joy to others.

And don't think it will run out, God will keep you well supplied. Also, let's broaden our interpretation of that verse. Yes, God says share your "choice food and sweet drink," and often we do that, it *is* important to feed the hungry. But our "choice food," whatever we have extra of, can be our time, our friendship, our support.

We had two tough deaths last year that really touched our church family: Amy Nessel and John Steers. The "sweet drinks" and "choice food" given to them and their families were time, presence, spirit, wisdom, patience, tears, affection, and sometimes, "choice food, sweet drinks," and fun.

There used to be a saying in charity that I didn't like. "Give till it hurts." Then someone fixed it, "Give till it stops hurting." So take our joyfulness, bring joy to others, find yourself even more joyful. That's the deal. And by the way, this "joyful January" isn't about money. You just provided mountains of Christmas toys for needy children. You just gave almost \$10,000 in your Christmas Eve offering for hunger ministries right around

here. And you just pledged \$800,000 to our church this year. We're not looking for money; we're looking for joy.

I've been a pastor since before electricity, so I have a thousand stories of how to bring a little joy into someone's life: a plate of cookies, a surprise visit, driving someone to an appointment, inviting someone over, taking some vegetables or flowers from your garden, baking a pie . . . it's quite endless. Joy comes in all sizes and packages, I'll tell you just one story.

One of the largest funerals I had in Massachusetts was for a retired lady. Nobody famous. No great accomplishments. Not popular. Actually, a rather quiet, private, unassuming person. But for 25 years, she read our small-town newspaper, scoured every page, looking for names. Who got married, who got a promotion, who had a baby, who just got a scholarship to college, who won a game, who lost a loved one, who had a car accident, who just bought a house. And yes, she checked the police blotter, the fire reports, all the small-town items that made an old-time local paper the social media of the day.

If you read the tabloids, you know about "**boldface**," names of those celebrities and VIPs and movie stars. But for this lady, everyone was a bold face. And every day she wrote a letter, a personal, hand-written note. A small thing? No small thing. Being thought of, being reached out to, being remembered, being touched is no small thing.

Our invitation is a simple one. Spread a little joy, take some of the bleakness out of January. From the wellspring of your own joy, take joy to someone else, Your God gives you joy. Your relationships increase your joy. You are joy-ful. You have joy to share.

Stop. Think. Do. Amen.