

Fish, Snakes, Eggs and Scorpions

Read: Luke 11:9-13; Galatians 5:16-26

I'll begin with a simple question: what is it that you want out of life? I once knew a man named Leonard. Leonard was a hard working dairy farmer, up at the crack of dawn taking care of his cows and working hard all day. I don't know what time of day he drank his first can of beer, but by the time he'd come to visit me in the evening, the alcohol had transformed him into an inebriated philosopher. Leonard's big question always came around to what he wanted: "understandment and satisfaction."

Many people answer the question with, "I just want to be happy." Others of us spend most of our energy pursuing pleasure. We skip from weekend to weekend, vacation to vacation, drink to drink, partner to partner, addiction to addiction, distraction to distraction, "amusing ourselves to death," as Neil Postman acerbically put it.

If you don't want the Holy Spirit messing with you, if you'd rather not have the Spirit of God fouling up your plans for yourself, if you are satisfied with life as you've devised it, and if your goal is simply to be happy and take pleasure wherever you can find it, then this sermon is not for you. In fact this whole series of sermons which began Sunday morning on New Year's Eve and continues on this week and for the weeks ahead may in fact be dangerous to your carefully composed equilibrium. If you are comfortable with life in the flesh, be warned: I mean to afflict you. You might mutter under your breath, "What else is new; your sermons are always a kind of affliction!" Touché!

If you are still with me, I want to continue to explore the character of Holy Spirit by following the organizing principle laid down by Jesus: you will know a tree by its fruits. Two weeks ago we began the journey through the gift list in Galatians by considering that the fruit of the Spirit is love. I said then that love is the most important gift hanging on the tree of the character of the Holy Spirit. If you want to get to know Holy Spirit well, the gateway is love. We saw the Holy Spirit in a person is the love of God in action. Without love governing the

expression of the fruit of the Spirit, the other fruits of the Spirit do not develop into ripened maturity, yielding blessings and nourishment to the Body of Christ. And the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit apart from love ends up in pride and division. As Paul wrote, without love I gain nothing; without love I am nothing. Love is the key that unlocks all the other doors in the Spirit-filled life.

Today I want to open the next door into the character of Holy Spirit by looking at joy. Let me start by saying that there is nothing wrong with happiness. There is nothing wrong with pleasurable experiences as long as you don't let the pursuit of pleasure lead you into self-destructive behaviors and addictions. The problem with both happiness and pleasure is that sooner or later they disappoint us. Why? Because what will satisfy us comes from much deeper down, from a place inside that happiness and pleasure don't touch.

Joy lives down there where happiness and pleasure don't go. Happiness and pleasure depend upon conditions outside of us. Their emotions rise and fall according to the circumstances of our lives. When things go the way we want, we're happy; when they don't we're sad or depressed or discouraged or hopeless, or we simply become sick and tired of being sick and tired. Every one of us has taken many a ride on the happiness roller coaster. Sometimes the ups and downs can be partially tamed by developing the discipline of keeping a positive attitude, but that discipline can only take you so far.

Pleasures come and go. Think of your last pleasurable meal, or weekend, or vacation, or whatever. Where are they now? Take the memories of any pleasure you want and ask the same question. It's not so much that happiness and pleasures are bad, it's that they are poor approximations of what our hearts truly long for. Happiness and pleasure don't stand up well under pressure. Joy does.

I went looking for a verse I know well: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Now where was that anyway; in Jeremiah or Lamentations? Somewhere back there. Aha! There it was, in Nehemiah 8:10. The verse is embedded in the midst of a story which goes like this. Israel had recently returned from a long and bitter exile. The Temple was in ruins. Led by Nehemiah

the people began the work of restoring their sacred place of worship. During excavations, scrolls of the Law were found.

All the people who could understand were gathered in one place and the Law of Moses was carefully read. Hearing God's Word brought the people under such conviction of sin that they began to openly weep tears of sorrow for their sins and of repentance. Then Nehemiah spoke these words: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Let's proceed carefully here. Notice whose joy it is first and foremost; it is the Lord's joy that strengthens us. Before joy is an experience we have, joy is a fruit *of the Spirit*, meaning that Holy Spirit is its source. And the Lord's joy is not subject to circumstances. As the Lord is constant and unchanging, so the Lord's joy is not subject to break under pressure. In fact, sometimes pressure causes the Lord's joy to shine most brightly.

But it is something deeply connected to us personally. Remember when Jesus said there was more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance? (*Luke 15:7*) It's as though heavenly joy is unleashed by human repentance. To the repentant people, whether in Nehemiah's day or in our own, when people connect with the grace of God through confession and repentance, they become strong. Sin makes us weak. We become strong through repentance.

God's heart is joyous when we are saved. Our hearts reflect the joy of our salvation as well. The joy of the Lord is our strength. The joy of the Lord is our source of comfort, of security, and of the sense of well-being as we come to know to whom we belong. "In life and death, we belong to God," as the Heidelberg Catechism put it.

That is the comforting aspect of the joy of the Lord. But there is a discomfoting aspect of the joy of the Lord as well. C. S. Lewis, who was an Oxford don and an avowed atheist found himself being stalked by the love and

grace of God. He said he was compelled to come into the kingdom, kicking and screaming, resisting God with his paltry might, but brought in he was. It was the joy of the Lord that did it. You can read about it if you wish in his book, Surprised by Joy.

He said that the idea of joy is not a satisfied desire but an unsatisfied desire—a deep longing for God, a hungry pursuit of God’s heart that never ends and is more satisfying than any earthly happiness. Lewis says he experienced a sudden, piercing pang of longing—a bittersweet ache and yearning for something far off, other worldly, and unnamed during each event.

Joy comes to us by the Holy Spirit in experiences which deepen our desire for more and more of God. In his fine book, Journey of Desire, John Eldredge says this: “Many Christians live with a nagging awareness that if they feel their hunger deeply it will undo them. We know that desire run amok can lead to affairs, substance abuse, pornography, addictions, and more. But to live fully—to live life as God meant for us to live—demands a full recovery of our heart. Citing Lewis he says our problem is not that we desire too much, but that we desire too little. Our appetites are not too big they’re too small. Desire was given to us as a good and holy gift. As I read in one on-line devotional, “Allow that longing to become the hottest fire in your life.”

In the movie “Shadowlands” about the life of C. S. Lewis, he and his wife Joy, who is in temporary remission from a serious cancer that would eventually return and claim her life, set out to find the place in the country that was the subject of a scene painted which hung on Lewis’s wall when he was a child. It had a magical quality for him. Sure enough, they found it. They walked into the pastoral landscape. A shower came up and they took refuge in a shelter. Lewis said, “I’m so happy. I don’t want anything else.” Joy said, “No Jack! The cancer will be back. But the sorrow now is part of the joy then; and the joy then is part of the happiness now.” It was a profound moment. It captured on film the nature of Christian joy. It is not a removal of our trials and sorrows. It seasons each one and transforms them into a source of longing for God and a well-spring of hope.

If we learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit's inner promptings, we will begin to experience exquisite moments with greater frequency which will kindle the fire within us to know more and more of God. The Holy Spirit will serve as the source of both our unsettling and our comfort. We will find strength as we walk through all of life's trials because of the underlying strength that joy gives to us. Will you always be happy? Of course not! Will everything be but pleasure and no pain? Not in this world. Will you always have access to the joy of the Lord? If you are connected to the Holy Spirit, the answer is yes.

Now, here's one last thing. I know many people are uncertain about the Holy Spirit. How do I get the Holy Spirit? Here's where the teaching of Jesus is so profoundly simple. He talks first about parents and children, fish and snakes, eggs and scorpions. He mentions evil parents who know how to give good gifts to their children. Then he finishes with, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Do you see how simple it is? If you are wondering, just ask! The Father delights to give you Holy Spirit as your comforter, your guide, your advocate, your "everything you need" to stay hungry for more and more of God. The joy of the Lord is your strength. Amen.