

Homily – Gratitude Leads to Joy

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How many of you have read the Winnie the Pooh books by A.A. Milne or seen any of the Winnie the Pooh videos on Disney? In these stories the main character is Pooh Bear, and there is another character named Eeyore. Eeyore is a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, old grey stuffed donkey. Eeyore is often depicted with a raincloud over his head, because things are always going wrong for him. He complains a lot and seems to have a sense of emptiness in his life.

Now, I have had extended times in my life in which I have felt empty. There have been times when I have felt like Eeyore and I have become obsessed with some meaningless goal that seems so important. The obsession seems so important because I can't stand that empty feeling.

Today's message is for you if you feel sometimes you are an Eeyore, or that you might live with one.

As Christians we have a cure for this empty feeling to life, and, it is very simple. You can't be an Eeyore and be thankful at the same time. It is impossible.

I've shared this message before, and I think it is important for us to hear again.

You can't feel empty and be thankful at the same time.

I first heard this message several years ago when I was going through my divorce. It was a time filled with gloom and I was in a funk. I had become Eeyore, and I was so intrigued when I heard this message about moving from emptiness to joy.

So today, as we celebrate Thanksgiving, I want us to look at this link between being thankful to God and having joy.

Now, we live in a culture today that focuses on happiness. If you ask most people what they want most, they respond by saying 'they want their children or grandchildren to be happy.' Happiness has become our goal.

However, I want to suggest to you today that the goal for Christians is not happiness. Our goal is joy. I'm talking about that joy that satisfies the deepest hungers in our souls. That joy is so hard to find in our culture today, and we need to shift from a secular goal of happiness to a Christian goal of joy.

Often it is not easy to change our focus. The media inundates us each day. We have complaints and if-only's. However, we can change to joy if we listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in one of this evening's readings and count our blessings rather than our problems. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul understands the link between being thankful and finding joy, and he wants us to have this joy also. For you see, giving thanks leads to joy because our focus is redirected from our problems to our blessings. Kind of obvious isn't it.

Few understand that joy is a bi-product. It is a bi-product of gratitude and contentment for the blessings that God has already provided. And, it runs head on with the myth in our culture that happiness is connected with getting what we want in the future. Secular happiness is when we fulfill our wish list, or we wait for our "if-only's".

John Lennon said, "life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans." Many of us are waiting in order to be happy. So life and joy never really happen. And, that is a tragedy. That is why even though this link between gratitude and joy is so simple it is also so profound.

Joy happens when we live in a continual state of gratitude as indicated in today's "Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song... Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise; give thanks to him and call upon his Name."

We are to be grateful to God and, the time to be thankful is now. Not at some future time when we receive that something that we think will free us to be joyful. Too many of us are caught in the twenty-first century American myth that focuses on problems and wants and greed and fears. And, it is a myth that robs us of the joy God would have us know today.

Henri Nouwen puts it so well. "To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy. But, to be grateful for all our lives, the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections. That requires hard spiritual work."

When Christians choose to count blessings rather than problems and unmet desires, we are going to find this soul-filling joy that can be ours today. Particularly today as

we walk out into a frightened world where so many people have lost their smile and their hope. I believe that gratitude is one of the best coping mechanisms for these times. And, I give it to you as a choice to accept.

Now one spiritual practice that can help us is a gratitude list. I know the biggest thing to be thankful for is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our list would be complete if we were just thankful for Jesus, but I want to extend this list to help your creative juices about getting thankful.

Here are some other possible things to add to your thank list.

Falling in love.

Hearing the heater come on during a cold winters night.

A warm shower without a water restrictor.

Lying in bed listening to the rain outside.

The first sip of coffee in the morning.

And, having someone tell you that you are beautiful.

Or, accidentally overhearing someone say something nice about you.

Waking up and realizing you have a few hours left to sleep.

Or, watching the sunrise.

We must remove ourselves from only thinking about wealth and remember all the ways that God has showered us with blessings.

So, do you want to banish a sense of emptiness? Does someone you love need a good jolt of joy?

There are so many things to thank God for if we will take the time to look and to think.

Look for the good signs and then say "thank you God."

And while you are at it, say thank you to a person who has blessed your life. Go out and thank someone.

When we finally understand that every good and perfect gift comes down to us from a very generous God, then it will change our lives, and we will find that soul filling joy. When we stop focusing on wealth we leave behind the cause of much emptiness.

And, we can start being thankful today not tomorrow. I am happy to say that a thankful heart transforms gloomy, empty Eeyore's into contagiously joyful Christians.