

Jim Gordon Holy Faith January 27 2019 Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19
1Corinthians 12:12-31a Luke 4:14-21 From the Book of Nehemiah: "The joy of
the Lord is your strength."

In the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Joy is contagious.

When I lived in L.A. in the 1980s, we had a living emblem of joy — Magic Johnson.

In Magic's first game as a Laker, his team was down by a point with seconds left. The ball was thrown into Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who made one of his famous hook shots at the buzzer to win the game.

Kareem started to lope off the court, only to see this 6-foot-9 rookie come running at him. Magic jumped into Kareem's arms and hugged him like the Lakers had just won the seventh game of the NBA Finals.

Kareem looked at Magic like he was nuts and said, "Calm down, Rookie; we've got 81 more of these games to go."

But Magic didn't calm down. Playing basketball was too joyful for him, and by the end of the season, Kareem was playing with more animation and verve than he had in years. Because joy is contagious.

It is also right and proper.

The priest Ezra knows this when he tells the Israelites in today's Old Testament reading to lift up their heads from the ground, stop their mourning and weeping and rejoice.

Times have been tough for them. These are the Jews who have come to their homeland at the end of the Babylon captivity. They've struggled — against

serious opposition — to rebuild their temple and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Now, at the beginning of the Festival of Booths, they've gathered to hear the law — the five books of Moses — read.

As they realize the degree to which they have fallen short of obeying the law, they bow their heads and worship the LORD with their faces to the ground. Now, there's a time for that kind of introspection. Our time for that — Lent — will be here before you know it.

But the Jews in today's reading are gathered for the first day of a festival, the Festival of Booths, Sukkot, and so Ezra tells them, ""This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."

He also tells them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine AND send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared — in other words, 'take care of your neighbor' (more on that later) — for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

At that point, the party begins.

Here's the next verse:

"And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them."

Joy is contagious. For those of us who go by the name of Christian, it is also proper.

Wrote Julian of Norwich: "The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love."

And I would add to that, knowledge of his sacrifice, knowledge of his Resurrection and Ascension, knowledge of our Resurrection to come.

And yet, in his book *"For the Life of the World,"* the Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann wrote, "Of all accusations against Christians, the most terrible one was uttered by Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy."

Nietzsche obviously had never been to an Episcopalian service. Yes, that's a joke and, no, to be joyful you don't have to jump up and down and dance in the aisles shout Hallelujah. Although it would be OK if you did — I think.

There's such a thing as quiet joy.

But whether it's loud or quiet, I think the most telling aspect of joy is that it is irrepressible, like a beach ball you try to keep under water in a swimming pool. Did you ever try that as a kid — or last week? Try as you might, the ball, filled with air, always finds a way to the surface.

Life, you may have noticed, is difficult, for all of us in one way or another. Sometimes exceedingly so. But the joy of the Lord buoys us, sends us up out of the water of despair like the air in the beach ball.

True inner joy cannot be forced; it has to be found. So, find a way to get in touch with it. Read the word of God. Read the Bible, but especially the Gospels; read about the Lord.

There's the joy of his actions — his healings, his miracles. There's the joy of his words, his wisdom. More than anything, there's the joy of his Resurrection and the promise of our own.

You know, last year we had a very high number of people die for this size of a parish. And at every one there was a degree of mourning, of course, but that wasn't the dominant emotion — at least not at the ones that included a Eucharist, the ones that were truly a Mass of the Resurrection.

In those services the dominant emotion was hope, even a touch of joy, joy at believing that the one who had died truly was, in ways we can't understand, in the presence of God. "Truly I tell you his day," the Lord tells the good thief on the cross, "you will be with me in Paradise."

If you can't find joy in those words, in that promise, I'm not sure what to tell you.

You know, it's funny. At today's forum we're having a presentation on the poetry of doubt. Here at Holy Faith we are not afraid of doubt. I think it comes with being human. But doubt doesn't produce joy.

Faith does.

Ezra told his people, "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

Find the joy of your faith and hold onto it. It will stand you in good stead in good times and bad. It will also influence those around you and the people you meet.

For joy is contagious.

I was going to end my sermon there, but I've discovered that we are seriously short of help for our week of service at the Interfaith Community Shelter — speaking of taking care of your neighbor. We need people to provide the food. We need people to serve the food and help in other ways.

If you have any questions, talk with Cathy Gronquist.

The joy of the Lord is your strength; it should also be your motivation.

Amen.