

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled?" Then the angel left her.

The Joy Committee

Maybe it was that this week Nominating committee met, so once again we were sitting down together looking at the copied pages, lists of our boards and committees, seeing where the openings are and trying to match people – their gifts, talents, interests and inclinations to work and ministry here at the church. Or maybe it was that I knew more than the usual number of people going through rough patches these days and while people have been saying that 2016 can't be over fast enough, some of them have also been saying that they are more than a bit anxious about what the future will bring. Or maybe it was that we are celebrating a baptism today an occasion that always carries with it great joy.

But I found myself wondering this week if perhaps our church, any church really might benefit from having a committee a new committee simply named the Joy Committee.

I went further than that by imagining bringing such an idea to the leadership council of the church. "Let's have a Joy committee" the pastor said. The members of the church council looked at me like I'd had too much coffee. *And what would such a committee do?* one of them asked. "Why, promote joy" I said. With a raised eyebrow, this church leader pressed on. *And just how would they do that?* She said. Well, that would be their charge, I said. To figure out ways to make our congregation an ever more joyful place.

Well, come to think of it, it could have been that Still Speaking Devotional that got me thinking of this idea. A few weeks back, at the start of Advent, Lillian Daniels, a UCC pastor, had written a piece on joy where she distinguished between joy and

happiness. "Happiness," Daniels wrote, "is a feeling, brought on by inner and outer circumstances. But joy is a theological concept that speaks to more than feelings or circumstances." She quoted a psychology professor who said that "joy is the intersection of deep pleasure and deep meaning" and pointed out that joy "...can occur even in unhappy situations, on either side of the hospital waiting room door. Joy, she said allows us to see the brilliance of life even as it may be slipping away from us.... It's a gift that is pure grace, a gift that is bigger than our human imaginations and sneaks up on us like a silent friend with a soft shoulder to cry on. Joy is big enough to contain our deeply felt tears." (*Sill Speaking Daily Devotional, November 30, 2016*)

But the people in the council meeting, the imaginary council meeting, had lots of questions. *How often would this joy committee meet?* and *Who would be on such a committee?* they asked.

I offered that I once heard of a church that made it a goal to have less meetings, as in evening meetings with agendas and and more meeting – as in gatherings where people truly met and encountered one another. Maybe, I suggested, the joy committee would be something like that.

Maybe, someone else offered, the joy committee could make sure that no one is doing anything in the church out of sheer obligation. Part of their work would be to check with people, make sure the committees or ministries they are serving haven't become tedious to them, make sure the church isn't making them feel guilty, or sucking the life out of them. Maybe, someone else said, the joy committee could write a note to everyone in the church, letting them know how important they are. People feel joyful when they are recognized and appreciated this person said. Maybe the joy committee, another offered, could make sure the worship services don't go on too long, a comment the pastor fielded with her usual grace and diplomacy.

More questions arose. *But, again, who would be on such a committee? What would we be looking for by way of people?* An interesting conversation broke out. We talked about how people who are joyful are not necessarily the ones who attract attention, the ones who tell all the stories, or jokes, the life of the party types. There are people we all know who emanate a kind of quiet joy. Think about the Christmas story, of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the old couple who waited a long time for a baby, this one who came to be known as John the Baptist. Think about Mary, who rejoiced in the angel's good news, that is, once she got over the stunning surprise of it all. The Christmas story reminds us that Joy comes in an openness to the twists and turns of life. Joy does not try to control, but believes, as Mary did "That with God all things are possible".

Oh yes a capacity to laugh would be good we said. We all need more of that. But joyful people do more than laugh. They notice. They are grateful. They hope. They lift up what is good. And they have a capacity to lead others into greater joy.

We got talking about how the joy committee could draw from all types – Mission types, deacon types, yes, even trustee types, older members, brand new members, and people who have never in a million years thought they'd serve on a committee.

As we talked like this, I could see the initial resistance to the joy committee was fading, that some enthusiasm was taking hold. We were still playing around, but we were beginning to imagine it. We had real ideas forming now: For instance, the joy committee could be a check on the church, when it becomes too much about “should” and not enough about grace. The joy committee, rather than creating its own events and programs, more to *do*, could be more like an infusion finding ways to bring deeper joy to the things we already do.

Around the table heads nodded. Yes, we need more joy in the world, and surely in the church. Our stalwart moderator suggested that we all think on this some more and that next month, if we all still thought it was a good idea, we could begin to move on it, and we all agreed.

Wait a minute, before we move on, someone said with a grin on his face I have just one more question. *Would the members of the joy committee be allowed to talk about politics at their meetings?* NO! someone nearly shouted out. Absolutely not! There is NO joy in *that!*

But someone else, someone we all know to be quite joyful said, “actually, I imagine it quite differently. We aren't called to a joy that sticks its head in the sand. Joy doesn't go around repeating “Every day in every way we're getting better and better” as if that alone will make it so. Joy lives in reality, thrives in it in fact, knowing that the present reality is never all there will be.”

What would be critical, this person said, is how they did it. The joy committee would know how to sing and pray in the midst of conversations that turn tense. The joy committee would find its wisdom in scripture. It would know beyond Opinions there is something greater, something more powerful and eternal to draw upon. So the joy committee would not be afraid.

And then, because everyone likes talking about favorite hymns, we started talking about what songs a joy committee might sing: Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee; Come thou Fount of Every Blessing; Here I am, Lord; Joy to the World, the Lord is Come; and Jesus Christ is Risen Today, all made the list.

Please do not think for a minute that in preaching this sermon today that I am saying our church lacks joy. I simply believe when it comes to spiritual gifts we can always grow in our capacity. So what do you think? Do you think we need another committee here at the church, a committee charged with increasing our joy?

If we had one, would you volunteer? Something else to ponder: would someone else

be led to nominate you?