

Sermon 4-26-20 Carriers of Joy
Central Church
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Ours is a challenging, difficult time. So, let me know, how are you doing? Many of us are struggling. Many of the people I hear from are afraid, others are frustrated, but most are confused. With some reason. With all the disruptions and changes that **COVID-19** has brought into our lives, it is easy to become focused on our fears and all the things we believe have been taken away from us. The loss of social interaction, loss of mobility, loss of work and revenue, loss of freedom of choice, loss of friends and loved ones, and uncertainty about what the future holds. These fears can take over our thoughts, focusing us on the negative, on our losses, on our fears.

Before we know it, we are walking around **like Eeyore**, living under a cloud. Let me share a conversation between Eeyore and his good friend Winnie the Pooh:

“Good morning, Eeyore,” said Pooh.

“Good morning, Pooh Bear,” said Eeyore gloomily. “If it IS a good morning,” he said. “Which I doubt,” said he.

How many of us find ourselves questioning whether this morning, or any morning for that matter, is good?

I remember only three and one half months ago starting the new year with vision and hope. This was the year when we were going to finish up the sewer, put the building issues of last year behind us, and focus on going deeper with God. And then came the COVID-19 virus. Today, we are all sheltering in place, focused on survival, and mourning the loss of loved ones that we can't even say goodbye to. We wonder if we will survive financially. We wonder if we will survive at all. We wonder what is next. If we allow it to, it can depress us. It is easy to fall into the trap of Eeyore, doubting if it will be a good day, or month, or year.

Yes, it is natural to focus on what we have lost, on what we may yet lose. But we don't have to respond like that, like Eeyore, doubting whether good mornings will ever come again. A number of years ago, I read Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*. In his book, Covey talked about how we too often react to change, especially change that disrupts our lives, in unhelpful ways. He advises that when that happens, when we find ourselves so focused on the negative, that

we can't see the positive around us. We need to undergo a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift occurs when we shift the way we are looking at a situation, when we change our assumptions, so that we can see our reality in new ways.

In many ways it is a matter of looking at a **glass of water** and asking, "Is it half empty? Or is it half full?" Those are profoundly different questions. For Eeyore, the glass was always half empty. Whereas for Pooh, it was half-full.

COVID-19 has changed the way in which many of us look at the world. We find ourselves glued to our television sets waiting for the latest word from the president, the governor, the doctors. We hear news story after news story telling us the glass is half-full. After a while, we become so focused on what we have lost and what we may lose that we start to see the whole world as half-full.

I am not saying that we have not experienced real losses. We have lost freedom, time, jobs, financial security, friends, and even family members. There are plenty of negative things to occupy our minds and imagination if we allow them to. I know. I have fallen into that trap myself.

However, I recently read an article by Bryan Champion in which he pointed out that if we shift our paradigm, we can see this time in a very different way. He explains that our time of sheltering-in-place, which most of us view so negatively, can also be seen as a gift, a gift from God. That's if we look for blessings instead of losses.

"Where is the blessing in all this? What do we have to be thankful for?" you might ask. For starters, there is the gift of time. My usual excuse for why I do not accomplish my goals, paint more pictures, spend time with the people that are important to me, or go deeper with God in prayer, is my lack of time. I want to do those things. I intend to do those things, but I don't have the time. However, that excuse no longer carries much weight. During this time of isolation, I have been given the gift of time. We have been given the gift of time.

Just the other day, I was whining about how we weren't able to finish the sewer project at the church. We missed worshipping together for **Easter** and now will miss the Kids' **Fun Run**. We lost the momentum of growing deeper. **Worship attendance** was on the rise, but who knows how many people will come back when this is over. There are funerals and weddings that we have missed. And **financially**, who knows how long it will take to recover. I was starting to sound a whole lot **like Eeyore**.

Then Bryan Champion reminded me that I could shift my paradigm. I could try to view things through different eyes, through God's eyes. I could look for blessings. It is amazing how different things look if we start seeing through God's eyes that the glass we thought was half empty is really half-full.

You might want to give it a try. Try prayerfully shifting your focus from what you might be missing and instead, ask God what you might do with the extra time you have been given. Perhaps you could focus on renewing relationships; studying your Bible; practicing spiritual disciplines - spending time in prayer and meditation with God; or addressing those goals that you haven't had the time to get to this year.

Learn from Pooh. Who once responded to his friend Piglet's negativity when Piglet posed the question, "Suppose a tree fell down when we were under it...". To which Pooh replied, "Suppose it didn't." Focusing on what we are losing, or worse, might lose, leads only to negativity and unhappiness. But focusing on what we can do and what is most important brings hope and joy.

I think that is what Paul was getting at when he advised the church to rejoice always.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. — Phil 4:4-8

I don't know about you, but I could use some of that peace now. That is why I have decided to shift my paradigm. To look for blessings through God's eyes. To see the glass as half-full. It is a choice. It really is a choice. Again, the Psalmist tells us (118:24): **"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."** We can choose joy.

So my recommendation to you is that you chose joy today. Turn off the news and take a walk. Enjoy the Spring. Look for **flowers, butterflies, birds.** Yes, there

are flowers, butterflies and birds even in the midst of the pandemic. Listen for the sounds of **kids playing**. Yes, kids are playing even in the midst of the pandemic. Read a good book. Spend time talking with loved ones. Yes, phones still work. Take a **day apart** to be with God in prayer. Find joy.

But, don't just find joy, share that joy with others. You may recall the story of Economic Crunch Ice-cream. Ben and Jerry's released this flavor in 1987 shortly after the October 19th, 1987 stock market crash. Why did they do this? They did it because that was their mission. The mission statement of Ben and Jerry's ice cream company is not making money. It is not even making ice-cream. Their mission is sharing joy. Thus, shortly after the 1987 stock crash, a Ben & Jerry's truck pulled up on Wall Street and gave out free scoops of Economic Crunch Ice-cream to traders on the street. It was their way of carrying out their mission, of sharing joy with those who needed it most.

If you think about it, that is our mission, too. Oh, we may say it differently. We say that our mission is **making disciples** by loving people and leading them to Christ. But, you could also say our mission is sharing the joy of Christ. Which means my mission and your mission is to choose joy and then share that joy with others, especially now, when they need joy so much.

One of the things that makes COVID so dangerous is that it is highly contagious. It is easily carried from person to person. And it is not just the virus. The negativity that arises from living with COVID is equally contagious. In the wake of COVID, there are carriers of the virus and almost as dangerous, there are carriers of negativity. People who, like Eeyore, share their pessimism with everyone they see. Our job is to help shift that paradigm. Our job is to choose joy not negativity and then share that joy with others. Our job is to be carriers of joy. Because as contagious as COVID is, as contagious as negativity is, joy is even more contagious.

So, go out this week and be carriers of Christ's joy.

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