

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
December 10, 2023
Luke 1:25-45

“Joy”

“How does a weary world rejoice? This is the question we’re asking during Advent. We began last week by acknowledging our weariness while affirming that God can work in and through us despite our weariness so we can find joy again.

This week our focus is on finding connections because one of the ways a weary world rejoices is by connecting – with other people, with God, with nature, or with an activity or hobby, just to name a few . So this is the topic we’re exploring today: finding connections, because when we find connections, we experience (we find) joy.

Now if you’re at all skeptical about this, I get it. I struggled all week with the topic. Until I started exploring what it means to be disconnected, and that’s when I discovered aha! Because when we’re disconnected, we’re usually not joyful. In fact, we may feel the polar opposite of joy. We may grow depressed or sad; we might become isolated. Or, we may become fearful, stingy, or mean.

When Dr. Lissa Rankin researched what makes the body healthy and what predisposes the body to illness, she was surprised by what she found. When asked "What's the greatest risk factor for disease?" she found that perhaps it's not our diet, our exercise regimen, the absence of bad habits like smoking, or genetics that most profoundly affect the health of the body. To her surprise, she found that scientific evidence suggests that loneliness may be the greatest public health issue . . . and few people are talking about it. She argues that we are made to be connected, and when we feel lonely, our nervous systems sense a threat, activating stress responses that predispose the body to illness. When we come together in conscious community, though, our nervous systems relax and the body's self-healing mechanisms activate, which make us healthier.

Now, if you’re a little skeptical . . . again, I don’t blame you. Plenty of people who are connected get sick. Being a social butterfly doesn’t inoculate one against chronic illness or worse.

But there is well publicized data about the rising rates of depression and the rising deaths of despair from drugs, alcohol, and suicide. Other statistics are also troubling. The percentage of people who say they don't have close friends has increased four-fold since 1990. The percentage of high school students who report persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness has shot up, and more than half of Americans say no one knows them well.

This data is cited in an excellent article by David Brooks titled "How America Got Mean". Brooks first asks the question, "Why are Americans so sad?", and then asks the related question, "Why have Americans become so mean?"

Hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level. Gun sales are surging. Social trust is plummeting. In 2000, 2/3 of households gave to charity; in 2018, less than half did. And the words that define our age reek of menace: conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, trauma, and safe spaces . . . just to name a few.

So we are sadder, and we are meaner. Could the 2 be related, Brooks asks?

Those who are knowledgeable about these subjects and study them for a living will blame various things: technology and social media are often cited; but so is the fact that we're more diverse as a nation and that's putting some white Americans into a tailspin; and others cite high levels of economic inequality that have left people afraid, alienated, and pessimistic.

No doubt all of these are causes of our sadness and meanness, but Brooks argues that at the root of it all is something so very simple: we're no longer connected. All those clubs people used to belong to: Rotary, Lions, and other such organizations are in decline. The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts have declining membership; religious organizations, including churches – all of them, by the way – have been losing membership. And there are plenty others . . . neighborhood groups, groups organized around hobbies, and the like – all in decline. Now, I realize that being a member of such clubs or religious groups doesn't automatically make one a morally good person. Nor do we need to return to the days when some clubs were based on a social hierarchy.

But when we live in community with others, we're more prone to treat with people kindness, and if we don't know how to do that, these organizations teach us how. After all, it's hard to be a member of an organization that has as its

foundation the Golden Rule and still live like a narcissist. When we're connected to others, we care about others. And others care about us! And in that caring connection, we find joy.

Which leads me to Mary and Elizabeth. When our story for today opens, Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant, her husband is still mute, and Mary learns from the angel Gabriel that she's going to give birth to the Savior of the world. The angel tells her not to be afraid of this news, and she asks how this can possibly be since she's a virgin. So the angel points out that God can do impossible things – why just look at your cousin Elizabeth for proof, he says. She's old and she got pregnant.

After acquiescing, Mary goes straight to Elizabeth to share her news. Now, based on how Luke tells the story, you'd think these two women were neighbors. But no – Mary and Elizabeth lived about 100 kilometers from one another. So it was no easy feat for Mary to travel to Elizabeth. And by all accounts, she did it alone. Imagine the thoughts that must have been racing through her mind: Does the Lord know how young I am? I haven't even been married yet and now I'm pregnant? The shame of being pregnant without being married first makes me weary, so how am I supposed to rejoice?

And during her 6 months of solitude and silence, who knows? Elizabeth probably had her own questions. I'm old . . . can I really do this? Does the Lord know how old I am? Will the baby be OK?

Notice that Mary and Elizabeth's concerns were similar, even though on the surface they're very different people. They come from different generations. Elizabeth is married, a priest's wife at that, while Mary is single. On the surface, they have so very little in common. But it didn't stop Mary from rushing to Elizabeth to share her news, and it didn't stop Elizabeth from throwing the door wide open to greet Mary. Which is quite remarkable, because she could have been judgmental. But she wasn't. Not at all. No, she shared in Mary's joy just like Mary shared in hers. And they probably shared their fears and anxieties, too – even though the Bible doesn't include that part. They connected through this shared experience, and in their connection, they found joy.

Friends, this story is a wonderful example of how we might find connection with people we'd never dream of . . . which is an important word for us today, as society becomes increasingly sadder or meaner when we isolate ourselves along

political, economic, educational, and generational divides – and grow more disconnected all while doing it. Elizabeth and Mary can show us how to cross that which divides. Generational theorists Neil Howe and William Strauss have suggested in their studies of American society that how one generation relates to the subsequent generation often dictates the prosperity or demise of the people as a whole. A generation that clings to power and seeks to preserve its own well-being at the cost of the young creates a crisis for the future. The young who refuse to listen to those who have walked before them can become isolated, disconnected and reactive wanderers with no center point to their lives because of their mistrust and rejection of traditions and institutions. In Elizabeth's praise of Mary, we can see a new way to cross generational boundaries. Elizabeth, the representative of an older generation, sings praises to the young girl who is bearing God's purposes into the world. Without her encounter and encouragement from Elizabeth, Mary might not have possessed the confidence to envision God's new creation. So Elizabeth has something to teach the older generation about celebrating the gifts of the young, instead of recoiling in defensiveness when a new generation sees things in new ways. And Mary has something to teach the young: that they are inheritors of a story that has some value, so perhaps it doesn't need to be rejected and abandoned outright. It is only together, because of the connection they've formed, that Elizabeth and Mary can come together – the past and the future. And so it is that this story calls us to keep our hearts open to other people's experiences so that we can find connection and joy, and pass that joy along to others.

And how else can we find connections with other people?

Day by day, and with God's help. As we get older, it can get harder and take longer. Believe, I know. When we moved here 5 ½ years ago we left 18 years' worth of connections in St. Louis, and the places where I'd found connections there – namely through my kids and school – wasn't as easy here. For starters, I didn't have as many school-age kids, and I had less time to get involved. Plus the kids were older, so there were fewer opportunities to meet other parents. So as we get older, it gets harder to find connections with other people. But it's not impossible, it just takes time and patience. So I offer up these suggestions, some of which may suit your life while others may not. Pick up the phone, and call that old friend. Put down your phone, and take a walk outside. Turn off the TV and

pick up a good book. Take a class, either in person or on Zoom. Call one of your pastors, we'd love to visit with you. (I'm never too busy to visit with you.) Friends, sometimes we have to let our needs be known. Seek out help if you need it. If you don't know how to find it, ask us. We can help you get connected. Get a dog. Get a cat. Volunteer. Call your kids. Tell your kids to call you. Come to church. Pray. Take part in a Bible study. Go to the dinner groups tomorrow night. Drive around and look at the Christmas lights. Call, text, or email that person you'd like to get to know better. Be brave. Be vulnerable. Put down your phone. Walk away from the screen. Experience the one precious life God has given you. And know that you are loved and claimed by God who is with you at all times, and in all things.

Amen.