

More Than We Can Imagine!
Ephesians 3:14-21; Luke 1:67-79
December 6, 2009
Lin Grace Rohr

The text we just heard from Ephesians is one of the greatest text of encouragement and hope in all of Scripture... “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever!” More than we can ask or imagine...we can ask and imagine an awful lot! This sounds like the perfect invitation for the creation of an extravagant Christmas list...World peace. Worldwide healthcare needs met. End of poverty. Recovery from natural disasters. Global economic renewal...we can imagine the list going on and on. While we continue to ask for these things in prayer and continue to work for these things; the encouraging and hope-filled words ring out in our imaginations like the “carol of the bells”...more than we can ask or imagine...more than we can ask or imagine! This text tells us that God working in us, glorifying God in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations! God working in us...joy in the church...is our focus today!

Before we get to the specifics, let me say that I know there is a danger in focusing on joy. Some may experience the focus on joy as insensitive to the hard times that they’re going through. By no means is our focus on joy to diminish these experiences, it’s a reminder that joy is with us, and for us, even in the midst of the hard times. Let me take a minute to share with you an experience from another church that was traumatic but also has become for me a story of strength as the church witnessing to joy in the midst of extreme pain. Years back, the day before Christmas Sunday, I had a call from a distressed parishioner that her husband, an beloved elder in the church, a retired, respected doctor in the community had committed suicide, and would I come. I was the first one on the violent scene where the parishioner and I together prayed; and watched and waited for the authorities to come. Among the hundreds of other things we did that day, we had to discuss how to share the tragedy with the congregation the next day. She said, “it’s Christmas Sunday...we will celebrate Christ coming to bring healing, help and joy to the world!” And we did! We sang Christmas carols of good news, the trumpets sounded, and the bells rang...Christ has come...joy to the world! One church’s witness that even in the darkest of times...the light of the world shines...!

So today, we look at the light shining in our church! We are going to look at God working in us...accomplishing more than we can ask or imagine! We are going to look at the glory of God in and through the ministry and mission of Covenant. I’ve invited three people to share with us...how they have experienced joy in our church world at Covenant. The first is high school senior Chantel Pivotto.

Chantel: When I was asked to speak today about what brings me joy in the church, I was pleased to know that I had many things I could talk about. From being a member of the youth band “exodus”, a regular attendee at Sunday night youth connection, and my favorite, mission trips, I find joy in many different places here at Covenant.

I became a member of the youth band starting my junior year of high school and it has been quite an experience since then, one which I have enjoyed. Every member of the band works hard and we all put in a large amount of time to perfect our performance. David is excellent on bass, and Michael is a gifted drummer. Rachel's voice is beautiful and it challenges others to do well. Gretchen definitely knows how to liven up a room and make people laugh, and Emily, though new to the group this year, has a great voice and has caught on quickly. Steve Royaltan and Chris Lee are excellent leaders and have pushed us to be our best in the band. They both have incredible talent, not only as musicians but also as amazing people. I thank them for all the work they do and for making my band experience enjoyable.

High school youth connection is a nice way to have fun, and hang out with people you might not see or know otherwise. I have made multiple friends and formed bonds that I will never forget. On Sunday we would usually play games or do team building or trust activities, then we'd separate into groups for discussion on a variety of topics. It was nice to have a chance to say what's on your mind about current events or issues. Youth group allowed me to let my guard down and feel relaxed and have fun. It was, and still is a great experience for me.

And then there are the mission trips, which have been the greatest experiences for me. I don't think I could ever run out of good things to say about them, but for you guys, I'll sum it all up in a few sentences. Mission trips have opened my eyes to many issues and taught me a lot of myself and about life. I've traveled to Minneapolis, MN; Lexington, KY; St. Louis, MO; Washington D.C.; and am planning to travel on my final mission trip to South Dakota this coming summer. On each trip I formed new bonds, saw new things, and learned from new people. From the things I've seen and done, these mission trips have inspired me to continue my mission work, even after high school is over. I can honestly say that I know that as I grow older I will always look back on youth group and the mission trips as unforgettable and very rewarding experiences and it will bring me joy to know that I was able to be part of the trips and the group.

What I have learned through writing this speech is that there are so many ways that I personally find joy in the church. I am confident that when I grow up, there will be many new ways to find joy as well. One thing I know is that the family we have here at Covenant is special. Everyone here is unique and different but we all have one thing in common; we come here to be together, to find God, to hope and to love; and of course to feel happiness and find joy in church and in life.

Chantel's story is one of many from the eighty-five teenagers who are involved in one way or another with our youth ministry here at Covenant. The second person to share is Elder Marge Resan; Marge will be sharing a letter from her husband Steve who had to work today.

Marge: I'm especially grateful and joyful this Advent season because I'm back home from a deployment to Iraq. The physical stresses from the deployment have gone away and the mental stresses are gradually going away since I've gotten back home. A lot of that has to do with my faith and the great people and spirit here at Covenant. I'm thankful to all of you for looking after Marge while I was gone, asking her if she needed anything or how I was doing. The less I had to worry about how things were going with her back at home, the easier my life was given the duties I had to take on while I was deployed.

I'm thankful for Mary Ircink who sent me copies of the Caravan. It was nice to get a little bit of

news from back home and to keep up on what was going on within the church. She also sent me some devotional readings that provided me comfort in times of stress. I also enjoyed the gigantic bags of Skittles! I'm kind of a Skittles junkie and I had no shortage of the candy while I was deployed.

I'm also thankful for Pastor Lin. I know she was very busy during the fall and I really appreciated the emails she would send which included scripture readings. These helped me feel safe, secure, and gave me a sense of purpose and understanding in the stressful situation. It was also great to hear the excitement in her writing in the emails about her upcoming wedding. It was nice to feel included, and even though I couldn't be there physically I could be there in spirit.

That's why this holiday season I'm especially grateful to all in the congregation who looked out for Marge, and to Mary and Lin for their messages of encouragement and faith. In tough times, I'm so thankful for Covenant and its members. It provides me a foundation of faith and love I can always depend on. I thank you all!

TSgt Steve Resan

We may have different views on how to work for peace...we may have different political opinions but in spite of our differences we can agree to disagree and support one another in the community of faith. Our third speaker is Elder Doug Poland. Doug will be sharing his joy in many areas of life here at Covenant.

Doug: I know that I am in the right profession because when Pastor Lin asked me to share with you today the joys that I have seen and experienced at Covenant, my first instinct was to break that question down and ponder: "What is the meaning of the word "Joy?" (If you didn't already know or couldn't guess, I am a lawyer.) But I say that only half tongue-in-cheek because when you stop and take a moment to think about it, there is a common use of the word "joy" that describes something that makes us happy or comfortable. We might take "joy" in a good meal, a concert, an art exhibit, an "A" on a test, a promotion at work, a good book -- you get the idea. But as I thought about the word "Joy," particularly in the season of advent, and the deeper meaning of that word for us as Christians, I considered the scriptural reference to "Joy" in describing the birth of Jesus. As we have heard this morning, "Joy" is the word that the Angel used to announce Jesus' birth: "Joy to the world." The Joy that the angel proclaimed was the manifestation of God's love for us, a love so deep and pervasive that God took on human form and came to dwell among us. Emmanuel -- "God with us." God coming to live among His people, to suffer with us, because God cares so deeply about each and every one of us -- that is the "Joy" that we, as Christians, celebrate and delight in. As scholar Stephen Mitchell has described it, the Joy of Jesus' Gospel is a joy "so vast, that it [is] no longer inside us, but we [are] inside it."

And in that context -- God with us -- the word "Joy" is reflected in many ways in the life of Covenant Presbyterian Church. I have felt God's presence with us in our worship services: in pastoral leadership not only from Pastor Lin but from the many other pastors and ministers in our Congregation who lovingly and thoughtfully share the word with us; in the music that Melissa, Doug, Steve Royaltan and his band, and the adult and children's choirs grace our services with. I have seen and felt God's presence with us in our gatherings for adult and children's education:

the children's education classes, singing times, puppet ministry, and other activities led with so much devotion and care by Donna and the volunteer teachers; the adult education classes, taught by incredibly talented and dedicated Covenant members and friends, which inspire us to explore together more deeply what it means to live into the lives that God intends for us; the Youth Ministries that Steve Royalton leads for dozens of middle and high school youth every year. I have seen God with us in the caring and compassionate ministry of Mary Ircink, our Parish Nurse, whose gracious service touches so many of our Covenant family. I have seen and felt God with us in the mission and outreach work to which Covenant members are so dedicated: the groups that travel to Guatemala every year; the Covenant members that host homeless families for IHN; the group of men that assist recently released prisoners; the Covenant members who serve meals at the Grace shelter, those who participate in building homes for Habitat for Humanity; and the list goes on and on. I have seen and felt God with us as we have gathered together as a Congregation, as we did last month when 150 of us came together for an evening of fellowship at the Congregational Dinner, and when we have gathered in smaller groups. And I have experienced God with us, too, as those of us who are active Elders on the Session have gathered to lovingly and prayerfully guide our church and our community of faith through difficult periods that test the strength of our bonds of Christian fellowship and discipleship. Great is God's incredible love for each and every one of us and great is God's presence in our life as a church.

And these are just three from our Covenant community! God is working in us...to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine! God is also working through us to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine. Just one example is your generosity to the Deacon's Fund this year so far has helped forty-five different people, and this doesn't include those individuals' families in the amount of over \$11,500! And we still have more than an adequate amount of money to help others in need in this season of sharing joy!

Joy in our church world...God is working in us here at Covenant...God is working through us here at Covenant...more than we can ask or imagine...for the glory of God in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations, forever and ever. Amen!