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**Title:** JOY: Count It All

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**Preaching:** Senior Associate Minister Ryan Hazen

**Scripture:** [Romans 8:18-28](#)

**Text:** [James 1:2-4](#)

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This is the second and final week of a series on JOY. First, I'm not sure that two weeks makes a "series" but it is that. Secondly, by saying that this is the final week of JOY, it feels like we're suggesting that, after today, there will be no more joy! I hope that is not the case.

If you weren't here last week, let me briefly bring you up to speed. We spent our time together trying to understand some definitions, specifically the differences and similarities between JOY and HAPPINESS. It was my contention that most of us draw a distinction between the two. Generally, we think that "happiness is temporary and fleeting and caused by external forces while joy is deep and internal and present regardless of circumstance." And, don't get me wrong, I like that definition too! It would have been so easy to say that happiness comes from your stuff and you have to constantly chase more and more stuff to get your fix of "happy." Joy, then, comes from God and it's always there for the taking. It's not a bad understanding.

Like many words in our lexicon, joy and happy have morphed in their meaning over the decades and centuries. A more historical and scriptural understanding didn't draw such a distinction as we now have. I confessed last week that I so much wanted to preach on easily obtainable joy. I wanted to say that if you just believed a little more, had a little more faith, you'll get there. But I couldn't do that because I know that, for many, joy and happiness are elusive. Part of the reason I couldn't do that is because in recent years, I've become more aware of the struggle for many with mental illness. For people with mental illness, joy and happiness are elusive and sometimes the church – a place that should be a place of sanctuary – is a place of pain.

I ended last week's sermon by affirming that being full of JOY is what God wants for us. I suggested it may start with a prayer. A prayer of David from one of his lowest points from Psalm 51 asks of God – "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Perhaps you prayed that prayer this week. I hope that you at least felt the presence of God in the darkness and shadows and in trials and suffering.

This week then, the second sermon of the two-part series, was to focus on finding joy in our trials – how do people do that? In scripture, there are many passages that point to others and encourage us to find joy in our suffering. The little epistle of James contains one such passage.

"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it (some translations say "COUNT IT ALL" thus the sermon title) – COUNT IT ALL nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

In the time that James was writing, being a Christian was a dangerous proposition. There were groups of people that thought Christianity wasn't anything more than a dangerous cult that needed to be exterminated. At the time of the writing, Christianity was in its infancy. It was spreading across Asia Minor and had made some inroads into Europe. It wasn't popular with the Jewish people, the Roman government or any of the temple priests that populated the Greek cities of the day.

The writer of James knew persecution. He knew trials and troubles. When James is talking about troubles, he knows of that which he speaks. In this passage, there are some truths that can inform our Christian journey even today, albeit in different way as those trials and our trials may be different but they are trials nonetheless.

Let me suggest three such truths in this little passage.<sup>1</sup> First, TROUBLES AND TRIALS WILL COME OUR WAY. No matter how hard we try to avoid them, they will find us. We can't avoid trials and troubles by hiding under a rock. We can't avoid them by being angry. We can't avoid them by being nice. We can't avoid them by trying to please people. We can't avoid the trials and troubles that this life brings and they come in all shapes and sizes. And here's what else – they usually come quickly.

As I was thinking about how quickly trouble comes our preschool director caught me in the hall and asked me to pray for a family friend. This family was at the zoo this week with their kids, one a 14 month old. The child was having a great time, was eating something and was toddling along and fell

and the food lodged in his throat. He is on life support and decisions must be made. The zoo one minute and life support the next. Trials and troubles do not respect our timing.

Truth Number 2: TRIALS AND TROUBLES WILL TEST US AND OUR FAITH. In this one it's important to remember that the trouble does not come from God. It's not God who is testing our faith – trouble is testing our faith. That trouble sometimes comes from our own making – we're pretty good at being our own worst enemy, aren't we – sometimes our trouble comes from other people or circumstances and sometimes our trouble and suffering is totally out of our control.

The third truth, like it or not, is that TRIALS AND TROUBLES HELP US GROW. At this point, some will be screaming, "Stop, I've grown enough." If you've ever had a major trial and came out better on the other side, you can give testimony to this truth. James says that trials build our endurance so that we are better able to handle the next trial. So, along with our trials, our endurance to persevere also grows. Anything that is worth anything takes time and effort. Progress in life, progress in school, progress in your career takes work, effort, sweat and tears. It's a process that continues throughout our whole life.

James tells us that when this endurance is fully developed, we will be "perfect and complete, needing nothing."

Since last Sunday's sermon and, truth be told for much of my ministry, I've thought about people in my life who have, on the one hand, encountered what seems to be more than their fair share of trouble in their life but, on the other hand, through it all seemed to have more joy than me – more joy than most anyone else. This week, I asked people to name names of people who fit this description in their lives – people who are dealing with or have dealt with a major trial in their life but yet, are the sheer embodiment of JOY. People who embody joy and lift us up in spite of their trouble past and present. And when I asked for names people gave me names...

There was Harold's elementary school music teacher who lost an only child but was a light for so many children, including Harold. There was Carl's brother who never complained about his own issues but cared deeply about others. Other names mentioned this week, some you know, some you don't - Jerry Long, Kent Maxfield, Dean Ramga, Mary Ellingson, Sharon Lorch, Mary Lou Madison, John Smitha, Tricia Dickson. Steve Lock. I agree with all of those by the way. I'm usually not much for audience participation sermons but I think we all know those names and I would love to add other names to this list. I want you to take another attendance card and write one name – more than one name on that card – of persons – living or passed –

who have embodied joy for you in spite of trouble and suffering. Take a moment and write a name or two.

Who's willing to say a name out loud?

Another name that struck me was Elaine Gorski. Some of you knew Elaine. She was a Geist Christian Church member who passed in 2013 at the age of 53. Elaine's spirit was rich and captivating. I was cleaning out some old email files this week and ran across this final update on her health that came the week before her death. "The Hospice team has entered into the final stage of care for Elaine. We/they are going to do everything possible to keep her comfortable and pain free. They have indicated that she has only days left. Amazingly, when given this news, Elaine was most concerned with others and how they would take it. She told me she is at peace and ready for the next step in her journey. She assured me that she is fine and that, more importantly, we will all be fine too. She encouraged us again with her mantra - 'Live like you're living.'" Elaine made bookmarks to remind people around her of such wisdom. Mine hangs above my desk, "live like you're living," with her initials EG at the bottom.

On Wednesday morning, I was struggling to put my finger on what was it about each of these and so many others that demonstrate joy in the midst of hardship. What was or is the common denominator of the names I mentioned and the names on your card? Then Carl Herr mentioned one word that hit me - I think he was onto something - that one word? CONTENTMENT.

The story is told about a pilot who always looked down intently on a certain valley in the Appalachians when the plane passed overhead. One day his co-pilot asked, "What's so interesting about that spot?" The pilot replied, "See that stream? Well, when I was a kid I used to sit down there on a log and fish. Every time an airplane flew over, I would look up and wish I were flying... Now I look down and wish I were fishing."<sup>2</sup> It is always tempting to think that others have it better than we do, and that if we just had "a little more" everything would be fine. For those who do not know contentment, joy and happiness is always just around the NEXT corner but is never in the here and now.

All of these people named and the others that fit this definition are happy with who they are and where they find themselves. It doesn't mean they don't strive to be better but they are happy with who and whose they are. They embody JOY in what is, not in what might be. Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." I know that every person confronted with a life-altering or even a

life-ending event struggles to find meaning in the suffering but that is what gives such trouble meaning.

Viktor Frankl suffered through the horror of years in concentration camps during World War II. He literally lost everything – family, job, and possessions - everything except one thing. The ability for him to choose his attitude. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he states, "...everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."<sup>3</sup> Every prisoner, said Frankl, had the inward power to choose what kind of prisoner he would be and I determined it for me. He's right. Paul and Silas had determined to be praising prisoners.

It's also true with us. There will never be a time for us when outward circumstances are just right. We can never control, change or manipulate outward circumstances that are beyond our control but we can exercise the inward freedom to control our response to those circumstances. It is our choice! George Buttrick once said, "The same sun that hardens the clay melts the wax."<sup>4</sup> It is our choice whether we will let the trials that are sure to come harden us or soften us. We can choose to be hopeful or hopeless.

General Creighton Adams once found himself on the battlefield completely surrounded by the enemy. Rather than resignation, he reportedly spoke to his men and said, "Men, now, for the first time in the history of the campaign, we are in a position to attack the enemy in any direction."<sup>5</sup>

Back to those three truths from James. You will suffer. TRIALS AND TROUBLES WILL COME YOUR WAY. It may be 10 minutes from now or 10 days from now or 10 years from now but not one of us is immune. And when it comes, IT WILL TEST YOU AND IT WILL TEST YOUR FAITH. Depending on the trial, it may just momentarily throw you off course or it may take you to your knees or it may lay you out altogether. It will test what you are made of and it will test the foundations of your belief system. You will question God and church you will wonder where the Holy Spirit is when you need it most.

The third truth from James – TRIALS AND TROUBLES HELP US GROW – is the one truth of the three that is true only if you let it be true. Will you suffer well? Will you suffer in such a way that God, through Jesus Christ, could do something good in you – grow you in love, and mercy, and patience, and kindness and faith, and Christ-likeness. If James is correct, these trials produce endurance and endurance brings you to a contentment that allows you to see, feel, understand and experience JOY.

Have you suffered? Are you suffering? In what way has or could God, if you would allow God to be in the suffering with you, use it to accomplish something good in you? People do notice the difference. Our naming of names, real names, real people, prove that people understand that people can be people of joy in the midst of trial. It happens because people see it in you. People who see JOY in SUFFERING in real people also see that Christ is at work in them. They see that you are suffering in a way that you absolutely could not apart from Christ.

You have names on a card. I want you to put that card in a place that will get in your way this week. It may be in your wallet or purse, it may be on your desk at work, it may be on your refrigerator. Wherever it is, put it some place that you will see multiple times in the course of your day and week. Every time you see the card do two things – give God thanks for that person being in your path. Ask God to instill in you the joy that that person has found.

Let me model that prayer. God, for those who have crossed our paths – for the names on every card in this room - in whom we see joy, we give you thanks this day. Help us to learn from them so that we too, can be your light to others. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Three truths from a December 29, 2015 sermon by Joe Birdsall, Trials and Troubles, found at [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com).

<sup>2</sup> Sermon illustration found at [www.ministry127.com](http://www.ministry127.com), Be Content Where You Are.

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, Viktor. Man's Search for Meaning, Beacon Press, 2006. Original publication date, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Buttrick quote from Gary Carver, September 1, 1990 sermon, Joy in Suffering, found at [www.preaching.com](http://www.preaching.com)

<sup>5</sup> Abrams quote found at [www.arlingtoncemetery.net/abrams](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/abrams).