

## JOY AND SHARING

Final Week of a 3-Week Christmas Series

Dec. 20, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's virtual Sunday worship celebration. Thanks so much for joining us! I'm Richard Maraj, senior minister here.

As we continue on with our wonderful holiday season, just want to remind you that on Wednesday, December the 23rd, and Thursday, December the 24th, we will be having one candlelighting service each night at 7 p.m. outside in the courtyard area. Hopefully you'll join us for that! We will also post a virtual version of it, as well, for you to enjoy this holiday season.

Also, don't forget on New Year's Eve: our annual Burning Bowl service. 7 p.m. on Thursday, the 31st of December. That will also be outside in the courtyard area. So join us for those services, as well.

Right now we are going to move on with our service, and prepare us for a time of prayer and meditation led by Rev. Lori.

### MEDITATION

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** I invite you to close your outer eyes as we come together for our time of prayer and meditation. Take in a deep, cleansing breath and release it slowly. And take in another mindful breath. As we release it, let go of anything that's been busy-ness this morning. Just gently let anything on your heart let go. As we begin to move our awareness within to that quiet, still place, where we are one with the Divine.

In this place, we feel God's unconditional love for us. We know that the Christmas season is about loving and about peace and about joy. As we share our lives with each other, we know that the Christmas lights represent the light in us. And that, as we shine our light, we're doing the work of God here on this planet. Each and every one of us has come for a very special purpose that only we can do. We're here to share God's love; to be God's hands and feet. To see the good in each other. To recognize that we are all one.

In this holiday season, we remember to rebirth that Christ Spirit within us: that Spirit of love. Of loving God and loving each other. That Spirit of healing anything that's between another person and being and practicing forgiveness. Just letting it go, so that -- in this holiday season -- we can truly be filled with the light of God. In this Christmas time, as we give and receive our gifts, we know that the greatest gift that we can give is our unconditional love for each other.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we feel God's love within.

### SILENCE

Sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this time together. As we open our hearts, as we share our gifts, as we know, God, that you are right here, right now, lifting us up into a higher consciousness. And for this and all our blessings, we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

### MESSAGE

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Thanks, Rev. Lori, for that wonderful meditation. Really, really appreciate it!

*"It's the most wonderful time of the year! With kids jingle-belling, and everyone telling you, 'Be of good cheer.' It's the most wonderful time of the year!"*

How many of you would agree that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year? It is the most joyful and happy time? And then how many of you have ever had Christmas where it was not the most

joyful? That it wasn't a happy experience? And you ever had a time where all the hullabaloo of Christmas was just so overwhelming you just kind of wished it would get by and get over with quick?

You know, Christmas is a joyful and wonderful time of the year, but it is not always an easy time for many of us. Sometimes it can be a difficult time, with the expectation and the pressure to feel merry and cheery and bright all through the season. Sometimes when people are going through a situation where they've lost a loved one, or they've gone through a divorce or have a major change in their life, or suddenly are starting over unexpectedly at Christmas ... it can make Christmas a challenging time. Sometimes Christmas is a trigger of family memories that were really painful or traumatic, or bring up family dysfunction and unpleasant experiences. Sometimes Christmas can trigger financial stresses and challenges or health issues or depression, or even the impact of going through addiction.

And sometimes when we don't feel all the commercialization that we should feel -- happy and get everything we want -- we can feel that maybe we're failures. Maybe we're doing something wrong. And we feel sad at the holidays. Even when people enjoy all the outer trappings and the activities and the presents and the traditional food, sometimes there's still a bit of an empty feeling: not feeling the spirit of Christmas or the joy of the holiday.

Christmas is a season of joy. It is a celebration of joy. In the book of Luke, Chapter 2, the angels are saying to the shepherds, *"Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David the Messiah, who is the Lord."*

You know, joy is a huge part of Christmas! But it's also a huge part of our lives! Jesus said he came that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete. Several verses and Scripture say things like, *"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord."* The Book of Job says, *"He will fill your lips with laughter and your mouths with shouts of joy."* Joy is a part of our nature. Joy is a part of our spiritual life and our spiritual experience, and how we are meant to enjoy and experience our lives.

So the question is: How do we add more joy and feel more of the joy of Christmas, when things aren't going as well as we'd like? How do we enjoy the depth of Christmas, even when we enjoy the outer trappings, but want to have a deeper experience of joy?

You know, today is our final Christmas series: part three of three. Week one was about the hope and possibility of Christmas. Last week was the love and connection of Christmas. And today we're going to talk about the JOY AND SHARING of Christmas.

And the first thing we need to do to increase of joy of Christmas is to **REALIZE THAT JOY IS AN INSIDE JOB**. As much as we enjoy all the beautiful lights and all the activities of Christmas, the truth is: Those things, alone, cannot fill us with the level of true joy and lasting joy within ourselves. You know, many of us have gotten to the point where we expect certain things to happen a certain way before we allow ourselves to feel a level of happiness. But the truth is: When we depend on outer things, there are just not enough gifts and not enough "stuff" out in the world to really fill our cup from within and feel that level of joy.

You know, we all know money can't buy us happiness. But at some level, we all want to give it our own shot! And at some level we believe that, if we get more stuff, that it will make us happier inside. And that is just not the truth. You know, Christmas is really about -- can only be experienced -- by feeling that joy within ourselves. When it says, *"The kingdom of God is within us,"* it means all the important things we ever seek in life can only come from within. Hope comes from within! Peace comes from within! Love must be felt within. Gratitude must be felt within. The fullness of all that we desire -- the kingdom of God -- truly is within us, and we need to go within and connect with it there.

In Psalm 16 it says, *"In God's presence is the fullness of joy."* It is only when we go within -- and feel that sense of oneness and connection -- that we truly experience the fullness of life.

Have you ever heard an answer that you knew was the right answer, but it's not the answer you really wanted to hear? Like, I'll give you an example. A friend of mine had a really high cholesterol level -- I think it was 230 -- and he brought it down to 180. And I was so impressed! I was so inspired; I wanted to know what was his secret?!? And then he started sharing. He said, "Well, I gave up meat, and I gave up eggs, and I gave up sugar, and I gave up alcohol. I gave up fried foods. And now I just eat tofu and fish and greens and grains." And I was like, "Ohhhh." I was disappointed that the answer was a disciplined diet! I know it's a disciplined diet, but that's not the answer I wanted to hear!

You ever had -- you've been struggling -- and someone says, "All your answers are within you!" and you just want to smack them in the head?!? Because even though you know it's the right answer, it's not the answer that we always want to hear. We want to take the pill, click our heels, snap our fingers, and shazam! You know: instant joy! But the truth is: Life does not work that way. For us to truly experience joy, we need to go within.

Here's what Emmett Fox says: *"The one thing that matters in our lives from our birth to our death is for us to find the Christ child. The inner light spoken of in the Bible as a child is the light of God. The conscious discovery by you that you have the power within you -- and your determination to make use of it -- that is the birth of the Christ child."*

I love that line! *"That conscious discovery by you that you have that power within you -- and your determination to make use of it -- that is the birth of the Christ child."* And what that's really saying is that happiness and joy is an inside joy. That nothing can fill us until we fill ourselves from within by connecting with God's Spirit within us.

And the truth is: It really is an inside job! Like, with Scrooge, what happened with him -- his transformation -- was he changed from within. He changed his perspective. He changed his awareness. He changed his attitude. And his life changed! Outside was the same, but because he changed from within, everything began to change: how he saw life; how he interacted with people; how he felt about life; how he felt about himself.

So could you imagine, just like Scrooge, something changing in you -- some shifting or adjusting in you -- in such a way that it would bring you the level of joy that's already in you? Bring you the level of joy that Scrooge felt on that Christmas morning? What would you need to let go? What would you need to shift? What would you need to adjust? What would you need to see differently to let that joy within you come forth?

I'll tell you, one of the number one ways is to take time to quiet our minds, quiet the busy-ness, and allow ourselves just to rest and turn within. To allow that Spirit and light of God -- that Christ child in us - - to really bubble up and come forth. It is only when we take time to quiet ourselves that we really can have a "birth" -- which is a coming forth -- of that Christ light, and that true joy of Christmas.

I don't think it's a coincidence that there was no room in the inn for the Christ child to be born. And that's saying that the environment in our lives can't be a crowded mind or a crowded life where there's no room. That, for the Christ child to be born -- for that Spirit of God to come forth -- the environment needs to be calm. It needs to be still. It's no coincidence that Jesus was born in the openness and the quiet and the stillness of the night. The Christ child came forth out of that.

And that's the environment we need! If we really want to experience joy at Christmas, we need to have a quiet time within ourselves, and to keep connecting and aligning and allowing that light and that Christ child to be awakened and reborn in ourselves.

So the second thing we need to do to experience greater joy is to **REJOICE IN OUR OWN LIFE**. And, you know, the word "rejoice" means "to express joy." And in the Bible it says many times to rejoice: *"Let the nations rejoice." "Let the lands rejoice." "Let the mountains rejoice." "Let the hills rejoice." "Let the people rejoice."* There in the times in the Bible it says, *"Rejoice! Rejoice! Again, I say rejoice!"* And it's all

about expressing your joy for life. Expressing the joy for all the goodness and blessings that we experience.

In Psalm 1:18 it says, *"This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."* And what it means is to express the joy that we have in our lives, and particularly the joy for our own lives. To rejoice in our life: the life that we have been given.

Let me ask you: On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how much do you rejoice in your life? How much do you rejoice in your home? Rejoice in your family? Rejoice in your relationship? Rejoice in yourself? And is there room for you to rejoice even more in your life and for your life?

You know, I think one of the reasons we don't rejoice as much or feel as much joy is because that -- when it comes to our lives -- we spend more time rejecting, regretting and resisting aspects of our lives than rejoicing and celebrating it. I think every one of us has some areas in our lives we wish weren't ours! We wish we could give away -- push away! We wish we had something else, that someone else had, instead.

Three things that rejoice our joy that I call "The Three C's." And that is: comparing, complaining and criticizing. Nothing sucks the joy out of our own life -- and prevents us from actually rejoicing in our own life -- as when we compare ourselves to others. Wishing we had what they had, or evaluating what our happiness is based on how much they have and how much we don't. Sometimes complaining and whining about what we don't like about our lives: that drains joy. And also criticizing ourselves and others -- judging ourselves. All these things focus on what we don't like, what isn't working, who we don't like. And wishing our lives were different. That is not rejoicing in our lives!

To me, rejoicing in our lives is about being engaged, being present, being appreciative. Utilizing all that we have in our lives. It's about embracing our problems wholeheartedly. It is about learning. It is about growing and making the best of everything that we experience. It's about getting excited about ourselves -- our lives -- of who we came to be, and what we came here to do.

You know, there's a wonderful parable called "The Parable of the Talents," where the master gives talents to three of his slaves. One got five; one got three; and one got one. And the ones that doubled it -- from five to 10 and from three to six -- the master said, *"Well done, my good and faithful servants; you have done well with what I have given you, and now you can share in more of your master's joy."* And what that's saying is: When we use what God has given us -- when we make the best of all our situations in our life -- it will actually expand, and God will share more joy and more good in our lives. But when we try to push away or hide or deny what's going on in our lives, it actually reduces our good and reduces our level our joy.

You know, the fact is: we need to look at our lives, and just celebrate and enjoy all the good that is there. And I guarantee you there is so much more good. The question is: Is our mind focused on it? And are we looking at it with a celebratory, thankful spirit and energy? Because that will always elevate our lives.

I saw this Christmas movie where this girl wouldn't want to go home. She always worked as a nurse on Christmas day, because she didn't want to hear about her being single. And she wanted to be single -- even lied about having somebody -- and family's all expecting her. She finally agreed to go to Christmas. And everyone is expecting a boyfriend, expecting a boyfriend. But she ends up bringing these friends and this clown from the hospital, and people that inspired her: a lady with cancer. And, even though she didn't get what she wanted, she realized how blessed she was to have people who care. Who inspire her, and encourage her, and believe in her. And her ability to reach out and have them in their lives.

You know, just because we don't have something doesn't mean there isn't a lot to rejoice about. And don't let one thing that you don't have in your life stop you from seeing how great your life is ... and celebrating and appreciating it. Rejoicing doesn't mean everything in your life is going to be perfect, but

it helps you see more of the totality of it, and handle and enjoy and experience it in a healthier, better way.

And the final thing is to **DEEPEN OUR EXPERIENCE OUR JOY, AND EXPAND IT AND SPREAD IT BY SHARING WITH OTHERS.** You know, as much as we can rejoice in our own lives, there's a depth and a level of joy that we deny ourselves if we don't move beyond ourselves to help and to care for others.

One of the fundamental things they say that children should learn that's an important part of mental and emotional development; that is learning to share. As simple as learning to share a toy, or learning to share a cookie, or learning to share a blanket actually opens a child's world to be considerate of others, to learn how to care, how to cooperate, how to feel a greater connection and closeness and bond with others. That really helps us and is an important part of all of our lives, including today! For ourselves!

It is a tradition at Christmas to give gifts! Sharing isn't just always about gifts; it could be sharing encouragement, sharing a sandwich, sharing a smile, volunteering. I mean, there are all kinds of ways! Sharing, in and of itself, actually increases and expands our joy!

They did a study where they had a group of people share the things they were grateful for in writing. Writing it down. And then the other group wrote it down and felt grateful. They had to practice feeling grateful. And the third group wrote it down, practiced feeling grateful, but then shared what their passion and what made them happy and what brought them joy to the people close to their lives. And it showed that, when you add that element of sharing it, it actually bolsters both. The one sharing it actually feels more joy, and the one hearing it feels more joy!

There's something about the power of sharing that expands and increases the level of joy. Because it's really sharing love! It's energy flowing! It's people connecting. It's feeling supported. It's feeling valued. All these little ways of sharing absolutely make a difference. Sharing a poem that you love. Or a reading or a book. Or your favorite music. All these acts of sharing are great! Even -- one of the greatest levels of sharing -- is sharing a smile, sharing laughter, and sharing some jokes! Let's see if we can increase our joy through me sharing some of these jokes! *[Laughs]*

What did the grammatically correct yodeler say? *"Yo-da-lay-dee-whom!"*

If two vegans have an argument, do they still call it a "beef"?

What kind of music do the planets like? Nep-tunes!

What do you call a priest who becomes a lawyer? A priest who becomes a lawyer? You call him a "Father in Law."

What did the weatherman say to Ruldoph's mom? *"It looks like rain, dear!"*

And, finally, why does Snoop-Dog use an umbrella? For "drizzle."

Now, has your joy level increased because I shared these jokes? Let's hope so! *[Laughs]* Or maybe your joy increased because I stopped telling the jokes! Either way, sharing plays an important role!

And the question is: What are you being called to share this Christmas? What are you being called to share with your family? What are you being called to share with your friends? And what are you being called to share with people you don't even know? Strangers?

You know, right now a lot of people don't have food in our country, and I was so touched to hear that food banks are having an increase of 60% of people giving. Because they care; they want to share of their abundance. They want to share of their goodness. Sometimes sharing our knowledge, sharing our encouragement ... all these acts of sharing absolutely increase the level of love and spread the level of joy to ourselves, others and everyone around.

You know, in Buddhism, they say there are two important mind practices. Number one: Always maintain a joyful mind. And number two: A joyful mind is natural and it is also something that needs to be cultivated.

And the way we connect with our natural joy is to connect and go within, and allow the Christ in us to bubble up. By taking time to quiet our mind, it opens up a space for that light and joy to come forth. And the two ways to cultivate -- to proactively create -- a joyful mind is by rejoicing in our lives. Celebrating the life that we've had ... not looking outside and wishing we were someone else. But to embrace the life that we have been given; that we have been called to live! Facing our problems open-heartedly is the way to increase our joy. And, also, to share: share with others. Deepen our joy by sharing whatever you're called in your life to give. To show your consideration and kindness to others. Because it really will increase the depth and feeling of joy at Christmas, and at any time.

When we practice these things, it really will be a very Merry Christmas for us, and it will be a joyful time for all.

God bless you!

### **OFFERING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** It's that time the time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to all of you who have contributed online, who've sent checks in; you've kept our great work going throughout all these past months.

And so our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

### **CLOSING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** So thank you for being with us. It's almost Christmas; we hope that you get to be with your family, even if it's on Zoom or on a phone call. And, if not, just know that God is here right now, and that each and every one of us is a divine creation, and that everyone is here to bless each other as we celebrate this Christmas season.

And now will you join me in the Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;

The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;

And the presence of God watches over us.

Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

Merry Christmas!

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