

CHRISTMAS JOY

Final Week of a 4-Week Advent Series

Dec. 23, 2020

Rev. Richard Rogers

Rev. Richard Rogers: Hi, I'm Richard Rogers, and I want to welcome you to the Wednesday night service at Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center. Tonight is about JOY! You know, we've been focusing on the qualities of Advent. Tonight is about joy, and I really want you to open your heart to a greater experience of joy, especially during this year. You know, sometimes during this year it's been really hard to find a place of joy. But that's where we're going today!

And I'm going to make a case why even this year that you should experience a level of joy, no matter what's going on in your life.

So, couple announcements. Tomorrow night on December 24, 7 o'clock, outside in our Courtyard we're doing our Christmas Candlelighting Service. It's going to be fabulous! It's a beautiful service. Come and be a part of it; it will just take your whole Christmas season up. We'll be socially distancing, masks, and outside. It's going to be ... Bundle up! But it's going to be a wonderful Christmas Eve Candlelighting Service.

Also, this week we released our Holiday Seasonal Showcase, and it's all of our favorite artists from Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center. They did an incredible Christmas show this week. It's on our website; go to unityphx.org. You can experience it; you can feel all the love and joy! It's going to be up there throughout the holiday season, so come and experience the joy of the season with our incredible musical talent!

Alright, that's all the announcements that I have for you! Let's move into our time of meditation. And we're just going to experience the joy of Christmas.

MEDITATION:

Take a deep breath, turn within, and I want you to feel the joy that is fully present right here, right now. The joy that God is born in you! The joy that the fullness of God is right here: right where you are!

Take another deep breath, and feel the activity of God. Feel the puregoodness of God. Pure joy. And I want you to feel that that joy is coming from within. It's coming from your connection with the Divine. That joy is a natural state of living in the awareness of God. As you connect to the power within you -- as you connect to your true self -- joy is overflowing. There is so much good -- there is so much God -- within you.

Thank you, God, for joy. Thank you, God; in the presence of any situation -- in the presence of any moment -- I choose joy. Thank you, God, that I'm no longer a victim of my feelings. Thank you, God, that I no longer need to go and down with all the feelings, but that I choose joy over and over again. I choose joy, especially at Christmas! I choose joy! I set myself free. I set myself free of all the emotional upset, and I choose joy. I choose joy!

Thank you, God! I choose joy! And so it is. Amen.

MESSAGE:

Rev. Richard Rogers: So the final candle that we light during our Advent season... The first one was based on faith. The second one was peace. Last week we lit the candle for love. And today we light the candle for the spiritual quality of JOY. [*Lights the Advent candle of joy*]

And sometimes joy during the holidays can be rather difficult. You know, we have all the expectations about the way the holidays are supposed to look, who we're supposed to be, what's supposed to be happening in our life. And today, we light the candle for joy, regardless of what's going on in our life. We light the candle for joy, because joy is our very nature. So we come together in joy today: to light the candle for joy, and to make a personal commitment to the power of joy in our life.

What's your favorite aspect of Unity? If you had to pick one aspect of Unity -- one teaching of Unity -- what's your favorite aspect of Unity? Right? And maybe we think about: Unity teaches spiritual principles, and that we teach Unity principles and, really, we can teach them in such a way that a five-year-old can understand them. We can really boil them down to a simple level of understanding that anybody can understand. Or maybe it's that we teach love ... and, not only teach love, but that we desire to practice it. For many people, when they come into this spiritual community, they feel -- they can feel the presence of love. They can feel that love from the moment they walk on the campus. Or maybe it's the fact that we're such a positive place: that we focus on the good. That we focus on positive thinking. That we're about being positive.

You know, this week we focus on the spiritual quality of JOY. And sometimes it's difficult to be positive when the world isn't looking very positive: when it's not looking very good. You know, this week we had over 300,000 have now passed because of COVID. You know, we have millions of people that are out of work. And we have a lot of difficult things going on right now in our world. And I want to talk to you about joy. And I remember as a kid, sitting in my own Unity church when I was a kid, and I remember a talk that the minister gave. And it was one of those happy, happy joy talks, right? And I'm thinking, *"That doesn't really match my life right now: what's going on with my family, or what's going on in my life."* And he's talking about this happy, happy, joy, joy stuff. And I'm thinking, *"Where does he live?"* Right? *"What's going on for him?"* Because that didn't really match my life.

And, as a minister, I've really always wanted to really address the needs of real people in their real life. And so today, I don't want to do a happy, happy joy talk, because it's Christmas. Because, for a lot of times -- and for a lot of people -- this is not an easy time! That people are going through a lot of grief and sadness. And people are scared. And people don't know how this is all going to work out. People have lost their jobs.

And so, I really want to acknowledge that, as we light this candle for joy today -- as we celebrate the spiritual quality of joy -- sometimes joy is a lot of work! Sometimes it's really hard to get to joy! Sometimes joy looks like it's too much work! Like, *"Bah, humbug!"* I just want to go be cranky or be sad or be upset or be disappointed. I don't want to have to try to get to joy. I don't want to have to kind of get to where it takes for me to actually believe that God's at work in my life when, right now, I'm not sure it looks like God is at work in my life! It may look in your life like you've been abandoned! Like there is no power at work in your life! That you're kind of stuck, and you're not sure how it's all going to work out.

So I want to go to Scripture, because I believe that -- in this Scripture, the story -- there's kind of a teaching for us. There's an opportunity for us to really go deeper, not only into the Scripture, but also to go deeper than our own feelings. To really remember how we get to joy. Because, for some of us, our path to joy right now: it looks tough! I mean, it does! *[Laughs]* It looks tough! Like, *"Yeah, yeah yeah. Joy, joy, happy, happy. But if you knew what was really going on in my life, you would not think it was happy, happy, joy, joy."* Right?

So, reading from Luke 2.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding over the fields, keeping watching over their flock at night."

And I just love that idea, right? Shepherds keeping watch over their flock at night. Right? And I want to really slow this down. I'm going to teach into this point, because this is so important. If we're going to move to a higher level of joy -- a deeper level of joy -- if we're going to touch real spiritual joy, we have to understand the teaching that is in this Scripture. That:

"There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock at night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them, and they were so afraid. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not; for behold -- I bring you good news of great joy which shall come to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you that you shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward men.' And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away to heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go, even to Bethlehem, and see the thing that has come to pass which the Lord has now made known to us.'"

Okay? So today I want to look at what it means to be a shepherd, and the way that we are called to shepherd ourselves through this time. Right? Because I know a shepherdess. I know a woman who used to be a shepherd. In fact, one of her first jobs was as a shepherd. She was living in Oregon and, as a young woman, the only job she could find was as a shepherd. As a shepherdess. And she spent a couple of years shepherding a flock of sheep around Oregon. And, in fact, that's what revealed her greatest gift for her. She now is a singer; she's an opera singer in New York. She sang at our wedding in New York City. We got married at Unity of New York, and we walked down Fifth Avenue. And when we got to the big Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, she sang to Jill and I. She sang, "When You Wish Upon a Star." And she was in this beautiful opera gown: this white opera gown. It was fabulous! It was a night that I will always remember!

And our friend, Julie, is this incredible opera singer. And she learned how to sing because she would sing to her sheep! In fact, she learned that, if she could sing -- she's got this amazing, huge, big voice -- and that she could sing, and that her sheep could hear from hundreds of yards: maybe a half a mile away. She could sing and her sheep would hear her, and come to her. [Laughs] They would come to her because they loved her, and they loved the sound of her voice. And she would guide them, and she would protect them. And she would shepherd them!

And what I want you to see today is that we need to be shepherds! It's a term that is often used for a minister -- that they are the shepherd of the flock. And the reality is: My job is to really support you, is to inspire you, is to guide you, is to teach you. But I never really felt like I'm your shepherd! Right? Because I never really see you as sheep, right? You're not following after me; I want you to be following your own Christ within!

I want you to be following the power of God within you: that guides you and directs you in every way. But I believe that we do need a shepherd! Right? That the role of the shepherd is to protect and provide for his or her flock. And that, sometimes in our life, we get to some pretty dark places. And when we get to some pretty dark places, we need to shepherd ourselves: we need to allow the Spirit of God within us to shepherd us out of the dark places, out of the scary places, out of the dangerous places. And we need to shepherd us into a greater level of light, into a greater level of truth. I would dare say, even to a greater level of joy.

That whatever is going on in your life, what I want you to see is that your mind needs to be shepherded. Your thoughts need to be guided. Your beingness needs to be directed over and over and over again toward the light. Because we can go to some pretty dark places. And if we choose to stay there, we can live a really difficult, painful, dark life. That each and every one of us needs to be shepherded by the

Spirit of God within us: to guide us out of the darkness in the world -- out of the darkness within our own mind sometimes -- and into a greater place of light.

So the Spirit of God in me is my source of joy! Right? The Spirit of God in me is guiding me out of the darkness.

So when we look at the Christmas story. Why was it that the shepherds were one of the first ones to hear the message of Jesus' birth? And I believe because they were the ones that were available! Like, if you're a shepherd, you're out in the middle of nowhere. Like, there's nothing between you and the sheep and the sky and the critters and the nature. And you're it! You're the guiding, directing force, right? But because you're in that place of vulnerability, you're also open to the activity of God that is guiding you and directing you in all things! Like, we can get so shut down. We can get so locked away from our own Spirit of God. We can get so disconnected from ourselves and the Spirit of God within us that we can no longer hear the angels guiding us! We can no longer feel the activity of God that is moving us to greater and greater directions.

So the shepherds were open! They were vulnerable! They were receptive! And, two: shepherds have to watch for the signs. Right? The job of the shepherd is to watch for the signs of an animal -- a wolf or a mountain lion. The job of the shepherd is to protect the flock. And so the shepherd is always paying attention. If there's a huge storm coming on from the distance, it is the job of the shepherd to move the flock to a safe place so that the thunder and the lightning do not scatter the herd. That the role of the shepherd is to pay attention to the signs.

And what I want you to see is that also happens in us! That we need to be willing to pay attention to the signs when we notice that our mind is going south. When we're moving into our place of fear. When we're moving into our place of darkness, we need to be paying attention to those situations -- to those people, to those environments -- that cause us to go into our dark places. And we need to be shepherding ourselves back to a higher level of joy! We need to be shepherding ourselves back to a greater level of good.

That's not a problem that things can go wrong in life. In fact, I'd like to make a case today that I think, from time to time, things are supposed to go wrong. That they literally are supposed to go wrong! And the reason that they are supposed to go wrong is so that we can really discover the power of God within us! But there's often times where we need to be guided back to that power. We need to be redirected back to our faith. We need to be redirected back to the power of believing.

So how is it that, in a world where we've got so many things going on -- there's so many opportunities to get off track -- how is it that we stand in our joy? And I have seven for you today. I have seven things that I want you to be aware of if you're committed to living in a more joyous experience, especially during this time.

The first one: And the first one's going to look like a conflict right off the get go. Right? Because the first thing that I think that we need to do if we're going to cultivate a greater level of joy in our life is to really look and **TO BE WILLING TO DEAL WITH OUR GRIEF**. I think grief is the number one undiagnosed problem in our world today. And I think grief is the number one thing that keeps us from joy. That if we're not dealing with our grief -- if we're not dealing and healing and transforming our grief -- we sit in our grief for years and years and years. And our grief actually robs us of joy.

See, the more that I'm willing to feel my grief and to give it to God -- the more that I'm willing to transform my grief -- I actually open a space for greater joy. But my soul can only hold so much! If every painful thing that I have ever gone through I have tucked neatly in my soul someplace -- if I have suppressed it and pushed it down -- then my soul is not open and available for joy. As I deal with my grief -- as I heal the grief of the past; as I heal the disappointments of yesterday -- I actually have more room today for joy.

So what's your grief about? What are the disappointments that you're still holding on to? What was the heartbreak that you've been through in your life? And my question for today is: Have you given it back to God? Have you felt the feelings? Have you gone into the experience, and then given it to God? Because God is the only thing in the Universe that is so pure that can never be polluted? Whatever your most painful thing is, if you're willing to give that to God, it is instantly transformed and comes back to bless you as Grace. That your grief actually can be transformed into joy if you're willing to give it back to God. Your disappointments, your pain, your sadness of the past: if you'll release it and give it to God -- if you'll give it to the activity of God in you -- it can actually be transformed, and transformed to a higher level of joy.

Two: that **THE PATH TO JOY IS ALWAYS THE PATH OF LETTING GO**. See, many of us were taught that the path of joy is acquisition. If I just get all the right stuff, then I'm going to be at joy. If I can just have the right house, the right spouse, the right job, the right amount of money -- if my body looks exactly the way it's supposed to -- then I'm going to be at joy. But the reality is: The path to joy is about letting go. It's about letting go of the pain and the resentment, as we said in the first point. That, over and over again, if you want to live a more joyous life: What's the thought? What's the feeling? What's the expectation? What's the disappointment that you'd have to let go of to move into a greater level of joy.

Three: To truly live in joy, I'm going to make the case that **WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO BE WILLING TO LISTEN TO THE ANGELS**. We have to be willing to let God guide us and direct us. If you want something to get excited about, you need to be a partner with God in the next level of your life. You need to be listening to the way that you're being guided and directed so that you can move and flow with the activity of God.

In Hawaii, there's an expression among the Hawaiians that says: *"Know where you're supposed to be, and know where you're not supposed to be."* Like, when you're living on an island, you actually have to pay attention to what's going on around you. So you actually have to know where you're supposed to be, and where you're not supposed to be. When we're listening to the voice of God within us -- when we're being guided and directed by our life -- I'm going to make a case today that your joy is magnified. Because you're living in the flow of life.

Four: **JOY IS IN THE MOMENT**. Now, how many of you have heard that? Right? We've all heard that: Joy is in the moment. Right? So joy is not about the past; it's not about the future. Joy is right here in this moment. When we can open to the moment that we're having, and really enjoy the moment we're having, our joy magnifies. We actually can learn to be joyous right where we are. Like, with this experience. And that's the power of being able to choose our feelings. When we can actually choose joy in the presence of whatever's going on in our life, that's actually a spiritual quality. That we get to choose joy over and over and over again in the moment.

Five. Five is about expanding your joy by **LOOKING FOR WAYS THAT YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**. What is God -- in this moment... How is God -- in this moment -- asking you to make a difference? And as you're willing to make a difference, over and over again... Sometimes it's just opening the door for somebody. Or stopping so that somebody can have your parking spot. Like, it's the little things that we are called to do over and over again that really do expand our joy.

Six. You know, I did a class recently on happiness. And one of the things that was so interesting to me is: There's literally research that shows that, if you **WRITE A NOTE OF GRATITUDE TO SOMEONE WHO'S MADE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR LIFE**, your sense of happiness goes up for about 30 days. That your general, overall sense of happiness goes up as you just write a note of gratitude. And deliver it or mail it to someone. And that their sense of joy goes up, as well. So it's one of those gifts that's a win/win/win. Right? So I'm going to invite you, during this holiday season, to take a few moments and write a note to someone who's made a difference in your life this year. By you being required to write a note of

gratitude, it really focuses you on the way that somebody else has blessed your life. And as they get that note in the mail, and they see that you've written this handwritten note -- not an email, not a text message -- but actually take the time to write a note and mail it to them, they will get a benefit of getting to know how their life made a difference in your life.

And seven: **CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT BELIEVING.** It really is. Right? From every Christmas special, you know -- The Miracle on 34th Street, or whatever the Christmas special is -- it's always about believing. And as we believe... As we believe in the power of God... As we believe that we're created in the image and likeness of God... As we believe in the power within us to overcome any situation... As we believe, we get happier. When we move into disbelief -- or unbelief or lack of belief -- we're not so happy! We're not so joyous! But if you believe that you can overcome any situation -- if you believe that you have the power of God within you, and that the power of God can set you free in any situation -- we get happier!

See, I want you to experience the joy of this holiday season, because you were created in the image and likeness of God. You were created and given the full Spirit of God within you. And I want you to have the spiritual maturity to choose joy, no matter what's going on in your life. So that our joy is not attached to the event or the outcome; our joy is a spiritual quality that bubbles up from within. And I know that some of us have a hard time with joy. Some of us are just not as easily can access their joy from within. That it takes more work. But every time we choose joy -- as we choose joy over and over again -- it makes a difference in our life. That your life is never going to be perfect. This Christmas is not going to be perfect. You may not be with the people that you love, and your Christmas may not be exactly the way you want it. It may not look right. And I'm going to invite you to choose joy anyway.

Will you take that into prayer with me?

And I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to joy. I choose joy! I choose joy over and over and over again. I choose joy. There is but one presence and one power at work in my life, and that power is God. That power is joy. And today I recommit my life to joy: right where I am. That joy is the only power. Right where I am, God is. Thank you, God, for joy. Thank you, God, for the power of emotional maturity: that I can choose joy over and over and over again. In the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we say thank you, God! And so it is. Amen.

COLLECTION

Alright. This is the time of giving of our gifts and tithes. I want to thank you all for your generous support of our ministry this year. You know, this ministry -- this year -- has been like no other in my history of ministry. You know, not to be able to do Wednesday night service for nine months, and so many of you have given so much to continue the work of this ministry that I want you to just to feel, from my heart to yours, that I thank you for your generous support of this ministry. Your gifts and tithes have meant the world to us! So thank you; thank you; thank you!!!

This is the time of giving of our gifts and tithes. I invite you to hold them in your hand as bless them together: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* Together: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give and all that I receive."* In the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.

CLOSING

Okay! So this week -- Christmas is just a couple of days away -- your only job is to practice joy: is letting go into the moment, trusting that the power of God in you is going to open a door to greater joy than you've ever known before. God bless you, friend, and have a great week and a Merry Christmas!!!!

