

# *What does a new heart look like?*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

December 13, 2009

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*Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup>John [the baptizer] said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

*Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)*

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*What's a Christmas heart look like? Would you know one if you saw one? With some help from the Grinch, John the Baptizer and the apostle Paul help us to flesh out the portrait of the new hearts, the God-given hearts.*

That ole' Grinch. A heart two sizes too small. So small he hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season. He hated it so much that he set out to steal it. Dressing up like Santa as best as he could, he “enlisted” his dog and set out through the wood. He went to the *Who*-homes and broke into them all. He took the stockings, the presents, all the toys to be found, just as he'd do in each home in *Who*-town. “He slunk to the icebox and took the *Whos'* feast. He took the *Who*-pudding! He took the roast beast. He cleaned out each icebox as quick as a flash. Why, the Grinch even took their last can of *Who*-hash!”

And when he was done, up the mountain he went, his fur flying, oh yes! he was surely hell-bent. But Christmas still came and that Grinch was in shock; he heard joyful *Whos* in each city block. They didn't need presents or all that roast beast, they had something better, a God-centered feast.

What he saw, what he heard, gave the Grinch something new. His heart grew three sizes. He'd had a break-through. He'd seen the *Who*-hearts and he'd wanted one too. So he got that new heart. He's now love through and through.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ok . . . we are three weeks into this and I still can't help myself. Fresh apologies to Dr. Seuss!

## Portraits of new hearts

I imagine that if you asked the Grinch just what a new heart, a God-given Christmas heart looked like, he'd tell you that he saw one in the town square of *Whoville* as they all gathered to *celebrate* Christmas despite the Grinch's best efforts. And you know what, the Grinch has got it just about right.

### Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the brief poignant letters that Paul wrote during his several imprisonments. The others are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Philippi is in Greece, but in the first century it was no typical Greek town. Having about 10,000 inhabitants, Philippi was on the *Via Ignatia*, the major highway connecting Asia Minor and the Adriatic Sea. Named for Alexander the Great's father, Philippi had the status of a Roman colony – its inhabitants were Roman citizens, with all the attendant privileges. City inscriptions were in Latin, not Greek. City government was modeled on Rome, not Athens. Philippi was very "Latinized."

Eugene Peterson calls Philippians "Paul's happiest letter." Most commentators would agree. Perhaps this is because we read the letter knowing that Paul wrote it from prison, in circumstances that most of us will never face. Yet, in his adversity, Paul finds reason to celebrate everywhere he turns and he prays that the Philippians will themselves find the joy that God has given him. Indeed, Paul writes that the Philippians themselves bring him great joy – they occupy a special place in his heart.

I urge you to find an easy-to-read version of Philippians (such as the *New Living Translation* or *The Good News*, or even Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*) and read the letter through in one sitting. Do this several times over the coming weeks as you seek to find joy in your own life this Christmas season. Take the time to read slowly, even prayerfully and you'll find a large measure of joy awaits you.

What would John the Baptizer say if we asked him to describe the new heart promised by God through his prophet Jeremiah? We get the answer in today's passage from Luke's gospel.

In his reflections on John's instructions in this passage, N. T. Wright tells the following story:

"A cartoon shows a skeptic shouting up to the heavens, 'God!, If you're up there, tell us what we should do!'

Back comes a voice: 'Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.'

The skeptic looks alarmed. 'Just testing,' he says.

'Me too,' replies the voice."

John lays it out straight and plain. Got two coats. Give one to someone who is cold. Got two sandwiches? Give one to someone who is hungry. Are you a tax collector? You don't have to make yourself unemployed, but you better start collecting only what is due. Tax collectors in that day were, you see, entrepreneurs who extracted as much money as they could get away with and would then keep anything that wasn't due to the government. No more lining one's pockets at the expense of others. Period! Soldiers? Like the tax-collectors, stop abusing people. Don't use your power over others to put your interests ahead of theirs. Just because you don't get paid as much as you'd like, you can't just take it from those who are weaker than you.

In all these cases, what is John doing? He is painting a portrait of a new heart, a heart that puts the interest of others ahead of its own. A heart that is forgiving and generous.

A heart that doesn't insist on returning every slight with a slap. A heart that is humble and compassionate. . . That's a Christmas heart, whether it is in a Grinch, a Who, or me, or you.

But what about Paul? What portrait might he paint of this new heart? Knowing Paul, it would be a multi-dimensional portrait with a lot of thought and care put into it. At its core, we'd find Jesus and the rejoicing that is ours when we revel in him. Celebrate! Jesus is Lord! Celebrate! He loves you! Doubt that? Look at the cross. The Lord is near.

We know that Christmas ought to be about rejoicing but, too often, we manage to turn it into yet another over-scheduled, over-committed anxiety-laden race. What's to be done? Perhaps the Whos learned that once all the stuff was gone, the real celebrating could begin. Standing together, singing in one voice that the day of Christ's Mass had arrive. "Rejoice!," Paul writes, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Paul writes to the community. His "your" is actually plural, a "y'all." Besides, who really wants to rejoice alone.

### Rejoice! Celebrate!

When we read Paul's words in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice . . . again, I say Rejoice!," many of us tend to see it only as some sort of internal feeling or experience, as if Paul is saying "Be happy!" or "Be filled with joy!" But that doesn't really capture Paul's intent. Peterson renders the verse this way: "Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him!" N. T. Wright renders it this way: "Celebrate joyfully in the Lord all the time. I'll say it again: celebrate!"

In the Bible, the experience of joy and the expression of joy are very close to the same thing. Joy is what happens at festivals and feasts and weddings – at Christmas! Jesus would often tell stories of God's great banquet to which all would be invited. Such occasions are celebrations of our relationship with God and the goodness of his creation. Indeed, what better to reason could there be to celebrate – yes, Jesus is Lord!

Wright notes that after urging the Philippians to celebrate, Paul reminds them they are to celebrate with gentleness. The NASB has "let your gentle spirit be known to all." Perhaps Paul knows that human celebration can easily turn into raucous exuberance and wild partying! At all times and in all places and on all occasions – even in our celebration of the Lord – others are to see in us the fruits of God's Spirit who dwells in us all: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

We will never learn to really celebrate Christmas until we learn to celebrate God and that is what we mean by *worship*. Worship is about more than majesty and greatness, it is also about beauty and truth and goodness and gratitude and delight. And worship may be about more than a worship service, but it is certainly not about less than that.

Having struggled over the years to move forward in my own discipleship, I can assure you of this. You will never find the life you seek so long as worship attendance is an option. What I think I might be getting out of it is not really the point. It is only by being there that I can move forward. There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his church and the essence of the church is the worship of our Lord and God. Not only during Advent and Christmas but all year.

How could we possibly hope to become more Christlike, to have new Christmas hearts, so long as we think worship attendance is optional, something we'll do so long as it is convenient and we are in the mood. Since (1) it will soon be the time of year we make resolutions and (2) we know we have to train for the lives we seek, let's resolve to attend a worship service every week. If you're out of town, get to a service out of town. If you are in town, come and worship at St. Andrew. Come and embrace our fellowship with Jesus Christ and one another. Watch your heart grow!

## Practicing Joy?

Can we really practice rejoicing? Can we learn to be more joyful? If the Grinch can learn, then we certainly can too!

Dallas Willard writes that becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus begins in learning to delight in our heavenly Father. Without that joy, we will be forever hamstrung in our efforts to live as Jesus taught, as God desires us to live. Simply put, without joy we will never find the lives we've always wanted. Happiness depends on our circumstances, but joy transcends them. "Grouchy Christian" ought to be an oxymoron. As I like back over my life at the Christians who most modeled Jesus for me, without exception each one always had a smile and a warm touch and a kind word. They lived the joy that they experienced in God. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

John Ortberg suggests several ways we can practice celebrating and delighting in God:

1. Start today – each day is God's day. Too often, we say to ourselves that we could be joyful or happy or content when we get the next promotion or get married or have kids or . . . whatever. But then, today is lost and tomorrow is lost. Before we realize it, we've lost months and years. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, celebrate God *today*.
2. Does your presence make others happy? It should. If not, spend more time around joyful people. You know a few people who seem joyful every time you see them. I can name a bunch here at St. Andrew. Spend time with them. Talk with them about their own joy. Ortberg suggests you might even ask one of them to be your "joy coach." The truth is that joyfulness does not come as easily to some of us as to others.
3. Fill one day a week with pleasant things and activities. Let those good pleasures cultivate gratitude in your heart. Joy will grow from that gratitude.
4. Here's one from Ortberg we've heard before. Unplug the TV for a week. Spend the time in play, in conversation. Cultivate intimacy with your loved ones. Just unplug.

You can think of other joy-giving practices. The key is to see that we have to train ourselves to see the world, our lives, and one another as God sees us, to see more than all the pain and struggle that can overwhelm us. I can't even begin to express the joy that washed over me when I found out that I was going to be a grandfather. Celebration is about learning how such joy can be a part of my life every day, not just on those "big" days. I want more of what I had when my son and his wife called us with the news. And God wants it for me.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin this discussion by talking about how we usually seek joy or happiness. What stories do you have about times when you've thought something would make you happy – but it proved disappointing or fleeting? I once bought an expensive piano because I somehow had decided that it would improve a very unhappy marriage. (Yes . . . I plead insanity on that one!) As parents, most of us try to teach our own kids that a new dress or a video game won't bring them lasting happiness, but I wonder how much we take to heart our own teachings. Where do we really begin looking for the joy of Christmas? What will you do this year that might help you rejoice and celebrate Christ's Mass?
2. You might talk about people you've known. Some are surely what Ortberg calls "joy-carriers" while others are "joy-killers." What have you learned from the joy-carriers in your life? In which category would people place you? How could you help a joy-killer to experience more joy in life?
3. Christmas is nearly here! What brings you joy now, this season? How can you cultivate greater joy? What's some specific joy-training to which you'll commit? How would you know if you are becoming more joyful? How would others know?
4. Even at as wonderful a church as St. Andrew, the average "active" member attends a worship service only twice a month. What is your own record of worship attendance? Why do you think that so many Christians view worship attendance as optional? How many people do you think go so far as to attend services when out of town or in the middle of the week at Encounter? How could we help people to grasp that worship of our Lord is essential – even if we don't feel like it or aren't sure what we are getting out of it?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

This week, we are going to read Paul's "letter of joy" twice – in one sitting and then slowly.

<p><b>Monday, Philippians 1-4</b> Try beginning by reading the letter in its entirety. It is only four chapters! You might use an easy-to-read rendering like the Good News or the New Living Translation.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Philippians 1:1-1:26</b> The letter's opening and Paul's news about himself</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Philippians 1:27-2:30</b> The Christian life (part 1) and future plans</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Philippians 3:1-4:1</b> The Christian life (part 2); Keep on keepin' on!</p>
<p><b>Friday, Philippians 4:2-23</b> The letter's conclusion – exhortations and thanks</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

