

Rejoice!

Rev. John Allen

Just about every year, the National Football League changes something in their rules. Whether it is adjusting what constitutes a catch, or trying to make the game safer by outlawing helmet-to-helmet hits, or moving the extra point further away, the game is always changing.

This year one of the most noticeable changes to the rules has been changes to how players are allowed to celebrate after scoring a touchdown.

In the past, players were not allowed to celebrate in any choreographed group way, or use the ball as a prop. Players were often penalized and fined for displays of celebration after scoring, earning the NFL a new meaning for its acronym” the No Fun League.”

This year, they have loosed up. And it has been fun to watch.

One team played a quick game of hide and seek in the end-zone.

Another set up in a formation like 10 bowling pins, and the player who scored rolled the ball at them, knocking them down.

One player, whose wife had given birth days before, took out his towel from his waistband, laid it over his shoulder, and burped the ball like it was a baby.

And, in what I think is an important rule to keep, players are still penalized for any displays that taunt the other team, or that might not be appropriate for younger fans.

I have been loving it.

And what I think is so great about it, is that in the midst of a sport that is taken so seriously, and that looks so violent, we get to see a little

reminder of the truth, that these are young men. And they are playing a game.

We get to see them show joy.

Joy.

This Third Sunday in advent is called Gaudette Sunday. Which is just the Latin word meaning Joy. This is the Sunday marked by Joy.

The pink candle on the advent wreath is our clue that today is a little different than the other days of advent, marked by deep purple.

While the rest of advent is a time of waiting, of watching the horizon hopefully and expectantly. This Sunday, we are asked to leap ahead just a little bit to feel a touch of the joy of Christmas.

It's like how, in my house growing up, we always pestered our parents into letting us open just one present the night before.

This is our early gift. Our first taste of the coming joy of Christmas. It is our first glimpse of light breaking over the horizon. Our first celebration, of the great gift God will give us in Christ.

And so this Sunday we read from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians this exhortation.

He tells them to pray, to give thanks, to practice discernment, and to keep the spirit of God alive in their life together. He tells them to do what is good, and abstain from evil.

All good pieces of advice.

And one more thing, he says.

Rejoice. Always.

No that one is a bit of an outlier. All the other things are things I can do, even if I don't much feel like it. I can pray and give thanks. I can

do the right thing. I can keep myself from doing bad things. Even if I don't much feel like it, it's kind of like eating your vegetables. When push comes to shove, you can do it.

But rejoice?

Why would scripture tell us to rejoice? What difference could it make?

The first thing to say is that joy is much more than happiness. And it is not just a higher degree of happiness. It is almost something else entirely.

Saying rejoice, is not saying, be happy!

What's joy?

You can always tell true joy because it changes people. Sometimes, it makes them unrecognizable.

An example:

My father is an extremely frugal man.

He never ordered things at restaurants when we were younger because he knew that my brother and I would probably leave enough on our plates to make a meal for him.

He was also famous in town for scavenging small kitchen appliances from the dump, a fact he always proudly announced to our house guests, but only after they had enjoyed the first few bits of their toast.

So for my Dad, I knew he was feeling joy, when the wallet opened up a little. Like if he suggested stopping for ice cream at the soft-serve place instead of responding to our pleading with his typical answer: “we have ice cream at home.”

Joy seems to make us different people. But that is only because it lets out some part of us that is hidden deep, behind fear, or shame, or caution, or doubt.

Joy opens us up.

Another way to know true joy is that it is almost always communal. Joy seeks company. We open the doors of our house. Throw the biggest party we can. When we feel joyful, we want other people near us. And we are drawn to people who are experiencing joy.

Not happiness. Joy.

Happy people can actually be kind of annoying sometimes. But joyful people. Truly joyful people, are electric.

The Bible is full of stories about people who come to follow Jesus seemingly without hesitation. He walks into their lives and they drop everything to follow him. Fishermen leave their boats and nets

behind, son's abandon their fathers, mostly without a second thought.

I long considered myself a sceptic about these stories, in part because I am the kind of person who has things filled out in my calendar years in advance. I can't relate to that kind of spontaneity.

But I think that it might have been Jesus' joy that led these people to follow him so quickly. They were just drawn to it.

Joy in this sense is not euphoria, or intense glee.

It is a kind of attunement. An alignment between who one is and how one is living.

Joy is the fullness of a life shining out, unencumbered by shame or fear. It's loose. It's free.

Joy comes when we are struck with awe, overwhelmed by beauty, reverent in the face of love, steeped in the mystery of being. When we are celebrating uninhibited all that is to be celebrated, even the simple fact of life, even the unchanging truth of God's love.

Most of us live our lives with the old rules. The ones that tell us how we can and cannot celebrate. When, and where, and how to be appropriately joyful. But keep it contained.

But that's no fun.

So I think that scriptures command to Christians to rejoice is not a command to feel happy all the time, nobody can do that.

Rather, it's a command to change the rules. To loosen up. To let the old barriers and boundaries give way a little bit in the face of awe, and beauty, and love.

To allow ourselves to fully feel, and to fully live, the experiences of joy that punctuate our lives.

At Christmas we celebrate a great gift. That God came to live with us in the person of Jesus. That God was willing to become as vulnerable and helpless as an infant. That God was willing to suffer the pain of a cruel world. All to be closer to us. And to draw us closer to God.

We celebrate the truth that God loves each of us too much to leave us alone.

We celebrate that God's vision for this world of peace and justice will one day come.

That calls for joy. Unbounded. Uninhibited joy.

The kind of joy that dances in the aisles.

The kind of joy that drags a pine tree into your living room even though you know it will make a huge mess.

The kind of joy that let's you eat what you want to eat.

The kind of joy that believes a child can change everything forever.

The kind of joy that dares to dream of a world where lions eat straw and weapons are bent into farm-tools.

The kind of joy that's willing to look foolish. For the sake of being true.

The kind of joy that draws. us toward one another, to share in it together.

The kind of joy that makes us different. Unrecognizable even.

You know, every funeral I have ever done. Whether it was for someone who lived a good long life, or someone who died far too young, every funeral has had one thing in common. Laughter.

It's inevitable. At some point during the service, someone tells a story that we all recognize. Or is the first one to finally utter an unflattering truth. And everyone laughs.

Are we happy? Of course not. But, for a moment the facade cracks, we all agree that we don't have to be so darn serious, we let ourselves be honest, we let ourselves feel light.

And, maybe even with tears still flowing, we feel it. Joy. Beauty. Connection, even in the face of death.

And do you know what happens when we give in to that moment? You suddenly know, even if just for a moment, that everything is going to be ok. That you are going to make it. That there is a future beyond your grief. A God who can hold all your pain and more.

That is the joy Christmas demands.

You don't have to put on a happy face or pretend everything is ok.

But you must rejoice.

You must forget the old rules and just let yourself go, don't hold back.

Look at the child in a manger, listen to the songs of angels, lift your candle in a Holy Night, open your heart to the tender presence of God. And feel it.

Joy.

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