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Romans 12:1-8
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The Joy of Being a Piccolo

I think I've told you all the story about the Dad who came home from work mad because a deadline was moved up and the pressure of finishing his project was eating him up. He was going to have to work at least four hours after dinner.

Mom also came home upset. She had overheard several of her co-workers making some rude comments about other people in the office. Now she was worried what they probably said about her.

Both Mom and Dad wanted a little sympathy from each other. Neither one got it. They sat down at the dinner table, cranky and grumpy.

Oh boy, I've been there before ... haven't you???

Emily, their five-year-old daughter, prayed before dinner, "God, it's Emily. How are you? I'm fine, thank you.

"Mom and Dad are mad. I don't know why. We've got birds and toys and mashed potatoes and each other.

"Maybe you can get them to stop being mad? Please do, or it's just gonna be you and me having any fun tonight. Amen."

Then there was the man who came into his pastor's office and slumped down into a chair.

“It used to be so easy to be joyful. When I first became a Christian joy just overflowed. I was always smiling and laughing.

“Now my faith seems so bland, my prayers are routine and my life is boring. Nothing is really wrong. I’ve just lost my joy. What should I do?”

Have you ever been there before?

There are times in life when joy is easy. It bubbles up inside of us. But, what do you do when joy becomes a struggle?

I’m not talking about those times when you are in the midst of a crisis or going through grief. That’s different.

I’m talking about ordinary life that just doesn’t seem exciting any more. It’s just boring. It’s ordinary.

Where do you find joy in a life that seems to be missing it? When you are bored or just feeling blah, what can you do to experience the joy of the Lord?

That’s the question I want us to keep in the back of our minds this morning.

This is the second Sunday of our Stewardship campaign: “Counting Ourselves Blessed.” Last Sunday we talked about the stewardship of time and today we will be talking about the stewardship of our gifts and talents.

In 17th century Italy, in the town of Cremona, there lived a young boy named Antonio. Cremona was famous for its music.

And of all the things in the world that Antonio wanted, he wanted to be able to make music.

Unfortunately, he couldn't sing or play an instrument.

His voice was high and squeaky, so he wasn't welcome in the Boys' Choir.

When he took violin lessons, the neighbors complained so much they persuaded his parents to make him stop.

Still, Antonio wanted to make music.

Because he couldn't sing or play an instrument, he often found himself alone. And so he whittled. He could whittle almost anything.

His friends kidded him because it seemed that his only talent was whittling.

Well, one day Antonio learned that a world-famous violinmaker named Niccolo Amati, son of Andrea Amati lived in Cremona.

The next morning Antonio went to visit Amati and begged to serve as his apprentice.

For many years he studied and worked. Antonio's knack for whittling grew into a skill of carving. And soon, his hobby became his craft.

Patiently he fashioned many violins, striving to make each one better and more beautiful than the one before.

When Antonio died, he left a legacy of over 1000 violins, each one bearing a label that said "Antonio Stradivarius."

Today they are the most sought after violins in all the world. The clarity of tone and careful craftsmanship remain untouched by the centuries.

Antonio Stradivarius could neither sing nor play, but he did what he could, and now, over 300 years later, his violins are still making beautiful music.

The world around him told him he couldn't make music because he couldn't sing or couldn't play an instrument. That wasn't his talent.

But, Antonio discovered what his talent was and, in turn, transformed wood into what has been called the epitome of all violins, a Stradivarius.

So, where do we find joy? What can we do to bring joy into our lives?

Joy comes by being the person we were created to be and by doing what God has gifted us to do. When we use our talents, joy will be part of our life.

Remember that man, at the beginning of my sermon, who met with his pastor to talk about joy? He was surprised by how his pastor responded.

“How have you given joy to someone else? Have you shared your faith with your family or with people at work?”

“Have you served people in the community who are hurting? Where are you serving at our church? In what ways are you using the gifts that God has given to you?”

Joy is not something you can store up. We only keep joy by giving it away. Our joy grows as we share in the work of Christ in the world.

You find joy by doing what God has created you to do, by using the talents and gifts you have been given and being the person that God made you to be.

Writer Philip Yancey once made a fascinating observation about finding joy. In his career as a writer and journalist he has interviewed a wide range of people.

He divides these people into two groups: stars and servants. For the stars, super star athletes, famous authors, TV personalities, he has only sympathy.

These "idols," he says, "are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met."

According to the standards of this age, these people have it made. They're famous, they have their pictures in magazines, they live in big, expensive homes.

But what we don't see are the troubled marriages, the tormented psyches, the incurable self-doubts.

Yancey contrasts the life-styles of these stars with a group he calls servants.

Servants include such people as relief workers in Bangladesh and language experts scattered through the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages.

"I was prepared to honor and admire these servants," Yancey writes, "to uphold them as inspiring examples. I wasn't prepared to envy them."

But envy them he did. As he reflected on the two groups, stars and servants, he declares that "the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones.

"They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, 'wasting' their talents among the poor and uneducated.

"Yet somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them. And they, in turn, live lives filled with joy!"

That's a message we all need to hear. It's a non-conformist message that runs counter to the prevailing message of our culture.

The words of the Apostle Paul in our text challenge us to live our lives not conforming to the standards of this age, but to allow ourselves to be transformed and live by the standards of Christ.

And when we do, notice that we do it not for ourselves, but for others. That's where true joy comes from.

Let me illustrate: Imagine, it is Christmas morning and your mom or dad hands you a present with your name on it.

You open it, and you find inside something you really wanted. It's a new iPad, let's say.

Yet no sooner do you want to turn it on and start downloading your favorite music and apps, then your mom or dad cuts in and tells you that the gift is not actually for you.

Yes, it's got your name on it. And you're therefore responsible to take care of it: make sure it's always charged, doesn't get lost or broken, and has all the right apps downloaded onto it.

But it's actually for your brother and sister.

"But I thought it was my gift," you say disappointedly.

"Yes, it is," they quickly respond. "It's your gift—but it's not for you; it's for your brother and sister. We gave it to you so that you could benefit them with it."

"But it's got my name on it," you say.

"Yes, because we gave it to you. But it's not for you, at least, not for you alone. We gave it to you for the sake of your sibling."

Now, while this might strike us as a funny scenario, it is the way God gives gifts. He puts your name on the gift he gives you; it's your gift. But it's not for you. It's for those around you.

As Peter says, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10).

The gifts we possess are simply God's grace wrapped in a human package. But God's grace is never self-directed; it's always others-directed.

So, too, our gifts, our talents, are to be used, not for our own sake, but for the sake of others.

In fact, Jesus assures us of a very radical principle of stewardship:

- the more we give away, the more we receive;
- the more we use our gifts, the better and more useful they become;
- to hoard them is not only selfish, but unwise.

We find that when we don't give our gifts away, when we fail to use them, or when we use them in a self-centered fashion, then they begin to dry up. We become selfish, narrow, and miserable.

Iowa's own *Music Man* from Mason City, Meredith Willson, used to love to tell the story about a band whose music so pleased a king of long ago that he opened his royal treasury to the musicians.

He invited them to walk in and to fill their instruments with as much gold as they could hold. For the tuba player and a few others that was wonderful news.

But one man, according to Willson, dejectedly departed saying, "And there I stood with my piccolo."

Far too many of us practice our stewardship of talents and abilities with the piccolo response.

We are tempted to consider only how much gold we can get out of a discovered ability that God has given to us for a while to use.

In contrast, the Apostle Paul says that talents and skills ought to be shared to make life better for other people. And that ought to be especially true in the church.

Paul says: "All of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Just think what this idea would make us like, if we all believed it and followed it here in our congregation!

We would leave this place not so much concerned about what we got out of the worship service, but rather asking ourselves how we had helped and what we had contributed.

In 1928 Ida Rubenstein asked Maurice Ravel to write a piece for orchestra beginning with just one instrument and then adding another, building until full orchestra was reached.

The result was the magnificent "Bolero."

He begins the piece with just the flutes, then the clarinets are added, then the bassoons, and instrument after instrument is added until the full orchestra plays that haunting tune.

That's the way it ought to be with God's people called the church: each one of us offering up our skills and gifts from God by playing the magnificent melody of Christ alive in the world.

Right now, each one of us is nurturing a profound talent or gift within ourselves and we may not even know it.

Many of us are just plain too scared to try out what we think our "gift" might be.

Often we are conscientiously avoiding situations where our gift might inadvertently slip to the surface.

Are you really a leader?

Don't you dare volunteer to help organize one of the service projects we are doing during Faith in Action weekend.

Are you really a speaker?

Don't you dare offer to be a liturgist or even preach some Sunday when I am away.

Are you filled with compassion?

Don't you dare offer to help out the homeless and hungry that populate the streets of this town or even those who need to feel your love that are right here this morning.

Are you really a teacher?

Don't you dare demonstrate how much you love kids and how easily you can communicate ideas and reveal information to others.

Are you really filled with a prophetic word for our church?

Don't you dare suppose that anything you might say could make a difference or step up and serve on session.

Psychologists joke that the two most stress-inducing experiences of human life are approaching death and public speaking.

When God offers up the gift of speaking, how many of us are inclined to run forward begging, "Me, me, oh please let me be the public speaker!"

But sometimes the talent God gives us may not be what we think we are any good at or what we find particularly pleasing or enjoyable to do. Sometimes God just has need of us.

That's especially true in small churches like ours!

Our "gift" may be something we have to work at long and hard before we feel any modicum of expertise.

But a transformed mind cannot be conformed, either by the expectations of the outside world or by the limitations of our own self-concepts.

When we try on new possible roles that might enable us to find and claim new talents for ourselves, we are renewed. Hear this: God never approaches us empty-handed.

The reason God offers us these gifts is not to glorify our abilities or highlight our weaknesses.

As members of the living Body of Christ, we are responsible for the health and maintenance of that Body. (repeat)

The gifts of love and leadership, compassion and counsel, prophesying and teaching are all exercises we perform for the sake of the Body's health.

Fitness experts preach, "If you don't use it, you lose it." Each of us must flex our talents in order to keep the Body of Christ fit and strong.

This morning, I invite you to spend some time this week in prayer, asking God to lead you and guide your thoughts as you reflect on three questions:

1. What talents has God given to me that I could use to build up God's kingdom here on earth?
2. Where is God calling me to use my talents?
3. What do I need to use my talents?

Then close your prayer by asking God to open the doors that will enable you to use your talents and hear Jesus say to you:

"Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."

Amen!