

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, December 16, 2018**  
**Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

**How to be Joyful rather than Sad**

I have been asking myself, if St. James were here today what might he say to the congregation of New St. James? I believe he would say this to us all from his letter:

“Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.”

I don't know if you are noticing this about the people we see on the street or in the malls these days, but this is my experience. As I watch people's faces as I pass them by, most of the faces are very serious and appear harried or even angry.

For many people I know, there is a deep sadness resident in their hearts. Life just hasn't worked out for them, the way they had it planned. Also, there is a deep spiritual hunger abroad today. People have tried several paths. They have been to church services that have left them cold. They yearn to find God but cannot. They don't know whether to believe in God or Christianity or even in people any more. What they really want is answers. They want to get connected to the Source of all things. But they have not been successful. And the result of this failure is a deep spiritual sadness. Sure, when you meet them, they put on a smile and a brave front and laugh and even joke. But deep down they are sad about life.

For a long time now, I have had a fascination with Chartres Cathedral in France. There is something deeply spiritual about this very old fabulous cathedral. You often see it photographed against fields of wheat with its graceful spires soaring fearlessly into the sun.

It has always been a community cathedral, built by the local people and deeply loved by them. Built in 860 after the original church had been pillaged by the Vikings, it was very nearly destroyed in a dreadful fire in 1194. One author states: “The cathedral was so beloved and considered so crucial to the community that people of all classes- nobles and peasants alike flocked from miles around to rebuild it.”

According to some sources Chartres was built on a pre-Christian holy site where the Goddess was worshipped at the site of an ancient spring. There is a spiritual something, indefinable, about Chartres.

There is a lovely marriage of Romanesque and Gothic architecture and the flying buttresses are magnificent. It also has a wonderful pipe organ in it.

But that is not why Mary Ann O'Rourke and some two dozen women were drawn to Chartres. Mary Ann O'Rourke had come personally not just to experience the cathedral but to walk the famous labyrinth which medieval Christians built in the cathedral.

The labyrinth was laid in stone around the year 1220. It is a very beautiful design in the floor and if the labyrinth was stretched out it would extend for over a quarter of a mile. Set in its center are six famous petals which give it the appearance of a flower. The pattern is in blue and white marble.

Mary Ann O'Rourke and her group had been given special permission to walk the labyrinth, after the church was closed in the evening, the tourists had all left and the cathedral precincts were quiet.

Mary Ann had lost both her parents. After her mother died, she had found herself very sad. She had uttered a prayer for help and had been drawn into a church on the Cornwall coast of England where she was visiting at the time. By coincidence, or perhaps not, she was drawn into the 12<sup>th</sup> century church at the precise moment a visiting soloist was singing The Holy City- a piece inextricably linked to her mother in her memory and suddenly she felt that her spiritual anguish had been addressed.

In the summer of 1998 she had come to Chartres to mourn her father. In the courtyard of Chartres, she again made a request:

“Holy Spirit, my father is gone now too, and there is a sadness that continues to pull me down, that makes me fearful of what lies at the center of my life. Please give me some understanding of how to deal with this.”

Mary Ann had brought with her a yellow shawl. At the time she had said; “I never wear yellow!”

But one of her female companions, a Methodist minister, said: “You must have it for joy!”

At the centre of Mary Ann's sadness was that she felt that she had been an inadequate daughter. She felt that she had not done enough for her parents. And try as she might she could not shake this feeling of sadness.

So, when she approached the labyrinth in the closed church in the close and holy darkness of the great cathedral, she was apprehensive. What would she find at the center of the labyrinth? When she had been getting ready that evening, she noticed the yellow shawl and had jammed it into her pocket.

Now here she was in this great cathedral and it was *her* time. One by one, at what was the right moment for each person, they began to walk the labyrinth.

Mary Ann began to move. The stones beneath her feet felt alive. She felt that she was one with all who had ever walked the labyrinth before, over the centuries. Their desires had been the same: To make their way to the centre of Something larger than themselves, to the core of the meaning of Life, to God.

Mary Ann began to have a strange experience. **She felt that she was not saying a prayer but being in a prayer, a part of a prayer.** She said quietly under her breath “ I am sorry that I wasn't a better daughter.” She tried to keep her emotions in, pressing her lips together.

This worked until she passed one of her group who was on her knees saying only these words: “Grandmother, grandmother.”

Mary Ann saw in her, the raw longing, aware that this woman was making a connection with someone in her past **that also turned a key in her own heart.**

Tears now began to course down her cheeks. Now she was close to the center where the six petalled flower was. With an intake of breath, she stepped inside and closed her eyes. Then she said “ Holy Spirit, I am here. At the heart of my life. Please let me know that You are here too.”

There was a rumbling sound, a tremble of music. She writes: “Like a wave forming in the sea, the music built up and up until it seemed to spill in a mighty cascade into the sanctuary. The organist had come in at that moment to play. “As the music swelled around us,” she said, “I had the sensation of being drawn upward, like a flower being released from a seed and stretching for the sun, surging toward the cathedral spires.” Mary Ann was transfixed! When she opened her eyes, she saw the yellow shawl spilling from her pocket. It now seemed completely right and natural for her to fling it around her shoulders and she felt God saying to her “Your cloak is not of sadness, but of joy.”

As she retraced her steps out of the labyrinth she moved with a new lightness. She saw her mother’s face. It was smiling. Then her father’s face appeared as well, also smiling and a powerful truth set her free. The voice inside her said:

“Your parents loved you as I love you. Exactly as you are. I have turned your sadness into a joyful dance.” Mary Ann lifted her arms as the yellow shawl spread around her and said: “ For joy! For Joy!”

There are three little parables told by Jesus. The lost coin, the treasure buried in a field and the story of the extraordinary pearl found in the market by the merchant.

Jesus is saying the kingdom of heaven is like this when it is discovered: Like a woman delighted to find a lost coin of value, the farmer whose plough bumps into a buried treasure in a field , opens the box and then goes quickly to buy the field, and the merchant who has searched all his life for the perfect pearl sees it in a local market, sells all that he has and buys the pearl.

Why did Jesus tell these parables?

Joachim Jeremias, the great Biblical scholar says that it is the overwhelming experience and splendour of the discovery. “Thus, it is with the kingdom of God. The effect of the news is overpowering. It fills the heart with gladness.”

Jesus lived in a day of organized religion. Religion had deteriorated into a set of rules to be followed at all costs. God would be angry if you did not follow the rules!

**It was not an experience of joy.**

Is that your kind of faith today?

Sure, you keep the ten commandments or try. You try to do what is right. But your faith to you is not a joyful experience. In fact, it makes you feel guilty, inadequate and discouraged.

That is not the kind of faith that Jesus taught!

I believe that Jesus was right. An authentic encounter with God is not with a set of rules, it is first and last an encounter with joy!

I have a simple lesson from St. James for the congregation of New St. James: "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." Get alone somewhere and deliberately draw near to God. That is why Jesus often went into the hills to pray... to be alone with God in quietness.

That is what happened to Mary O'Rourke in Chartres Cathedral. There she deliberately drew near to God and God in graciousness drew near to her... **and that was a sudden experience of joy!**

Here is the good news! Joy is the great authentication of a true faith- for an encounter with the God of us all who is very great and wonderful, is joy beyond words...

Do you have to go to Chartres to experience this?

No, it can come in a thousand ways tailored especially to you, in your life, now.

God is good. An authentic encounter with God is usually a surprise and it can occur anywhere!

One summer we got up early before the sun rose and drove to a beach on Lake Huron. The beach, except for a tent and a dog frisking about, was deserted. The lake was a Glimmerglass and the water was crystal clear!

We went in for a swim. At the edge the water was warm, a little further out it was bracing- not too cold to enjoy, however.

I felt a great oneness with all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. Suddenly a school of small fish began to jump out of the water together, only a few feet away from us. The sun rose over the cliff edge and for a moment the same hues, pinks and blues of the night before's sunset were painted across the sky.

The whole experience was spiritual, mystical, healing and deeply energizing.

We left the water and went up for breakfast- hot croissants gently melting the butter, cereal and a special hot order from the kitchen.

I felt very close to God- full of gratitude when suddenly Bach's Air on a G string began on the sound system, played by full orchestra at the perfect level. The moment was of deep magic and joy and my eyes filled with tears of gratitude. At the deepest level, like Mary Ann, **I felt that my cloak was not of sadness, but of joy.**

That is what Christmas is really about in its deepest experience. It is all about joy and gratitude.

When we experience it, it beats anything that can be compared with it, because it is an encounter with the Great Being who made us and that is always an experience of Joy and hope and peace and love.

Do you know this authentic joy?

If you do you can slip off the cloak of sadness and dress in your natural cloak ...one of joy.

If you do not know this joy and you have wrapped around you a cloak of sadness to ward off the chills and despairs of your life,

Then...in the words of John O' Donohue

“On the day when

The weight deadens

On your shoulders

And you stumble,

May the clay dance

To balance you.

And when your eyes

Freeze behind

The grey window

And the ghost of loss

Gets into you,

May a flock of colours,

Indigo, red, green

And azure blue,

Come to awaken in you

A meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays

In the currach of thought

And a stain of ocean

Blackens beneath you,

May there come across the waters

A path of yellow moonlight

To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,

May the clarity of light be yours,

May the fluency of the ocean be yours,

May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so, may a slow

Wind work these words

Of love around you,

An invisible cloak [of Joy]

To mind your life.”

“Draw near to God and God **will** draw near to you!”