

# Joy of HEAVEN, TO EARTH COME DOWN

Sermon, May 22, 2022

Text: John 13:33-38; 15:9-17



During the Time With the Children, I used a story told by singer/songwriter/devotional author Carolyn Arends about her three year old daughter who had the Sunday School assignment of cutting out and pasting pictures of children engaged in different acts of worship, and gluing them onto a sheet, which I sort of re-created on the whiteboard. Carolyn, the mother, asked her daughter what act of worship each picture represented. As the mother pointed to each picture, little Bethany would shout out, "That's Praying!" "Giving!" "Reading the Bible!" One picture was of a boy (my picture was a girl, but that's OK) with his mouth open wide, and little Bethany said, "That's my FAVORITE!" The mother, of course, expected little Bethany to say, "That's Singing!", as singing was also Mom's favorite act of worship. But when Mom pointed to the picture and asked, "And what is this?" Bethany answered, "Laughing!"

The mother wrote, "I stood corrected. Laughing is my favorite form of worship, too."



To follow up on that Time with the Children: Yes, Laughter is certainly an appropriate act of worship, for we worship a joyful God! Of course, we are talking about the good kind of laughter. There is also derisive laughter, rooted in vulgarity or cruelty or pettiness. It's not hard to tell the redemptive kind from the destructive kind. Some select quotes on laughter I've cited before: Voltaire wrote: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh." Martin Luther-- "If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there." Julia Roberts -- "Show me a person who doesn't like to laugh and I'll show you a person ready for a toe tag." Woody Allen: "I am thankful for laughter, except when milk comes out of my nose." William James -- "We don't laugh because we're happy - we're happy because we laugh." Shirley MacLaine -- "A person who knows how to laugh at himself will never cease to be amused." Edgar Watson Howe -- "If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old." Michael Pritchard -- "You don't stop laughing because you grow old. You grow old because you stop laughing." Mary Pettibone Poole -- "He who laughs, lasts!" According to a 1985 Parade Magazine poll, "The number one reason for choosing a mate is the ability to laugh together." A Japanese proverb -- "Time spent laughing is time spent with the gods." Karl Barth: "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."

(I told this next story sixteen years ago from this pulpit; if anyone here remembers it, I'll be impressed). She was waiting in the reception room for her first appointment with a new dentist. She noticed his certificate on the wall, with his name emblazoned on it. She remembered that a tall boy with the same name had been in her high school class some thirty years ago. When the dentist entered the room, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. Surely this balding, gray-haired man with the deeply lined face and cheeky jowls was much too old to have been her classmate. After he examined her teeth, she asked him if he had attended the local high school.

"Yes," he replied.

"When did you graduate?" she asked.

He answered, "In 1975."

"Why, you were in my class!" she exclaimed.

He looked at her closely and then asked, "What did you teach?"

There's something in all of us that rebels at the thought of our aging ... and it is not just because of our fear of death, or our anxieties about disease, or even the eventual losing of youthful appearance, although these are all daunting realities. I'm convinced one huge reason we rebel at the concept of our inevitable aging is that we are made in the image of a God Who does not age! Sometimes people think of God as being somehow old, ancient; a thin-lipped, stern, grumpy deity who just has no patience with the foibles of His children. That image is partly understandable; the Bible does refer to Him as the Ancient of Days. But although we age, God does not! God doesn't grow old, God doesn't get sick, God never grows cynical or grouchy, God doesn't worry, God is not forgetful ... except when He intentionally chooses not to remember, as in the case of our forgiven sins ... He is the same today, yesterday and forever. G.K. Chesterton wrote, "We have sinned and grown old, [but] our Father is younger than we."<sup>1</sup> God has all the exuberance, joy and buoyant optimism of eternal youth; He is forever young. The Ultimate blend of exuberant youth and perfect wisdom.

I've said this a "few" times over the past twenty-five years, and I'm sure to say it a few more times before I retire, but if I've learned nothing else in my years of ministry, I've learned we will never understand God until we get it through our heads that this forever young God we worship is JOYFUL. He is the most joyous Being in the

<sup>1</sup> For the full quote in its context, see <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/19966-because-children-have-abounding-vitality-because-they-are-in-spirit>

universe. God did not create the world in order to judge it, or dominate it, or to make it obey the dictates of His will. God made the world to DELIGHT in it, He made this world and all in it to share in His overflowing joy and love, and He loved this world so much that He sent His son that we might have life, effervescent life, now and forever. He delights when we discover the delight of His good ways. God wishes to share His joy, He wishes to lavish love *on* and share blessings *with* His beloved. **Joy** is of the essence of God's character, and joy is, ultimately, the eternal destiny of this universe He created. As author C. S. Lewis expressed it so well, *"Joy is the serious business of heaven!"* Because He loves us, God wants us to share in that joy, and has gone to extraordinary lengths, serious lengths, even to the cross, to secure joy for us, to bring joy down to us. As we just sang, *"Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down!"* In the selections we read from John this morning, Jesus was with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion, and so much of what He said on that potentially sorrowful night is just infused with love and with joy. *"I have said these things to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."* Jesus' joy, the Father's joy, that's the joy we know by the gracious gift of love from above, the Joy in which we are invited to live our lives, now and forever!

The choir's anthem this morning, "Lord of the Dance," was written by Sydney Carter in 1963 to a tune used by that American religious "subsect" of the Quaker sect called the Shakers, *"'Tis a Gift to be Simple."* C.S. Lewis would have liked this anthem; sadly, he probably never heard it, 1963 was the year he passed away at age 65 (*Some of you know he died November 22, the same day President Kennedy was assassinated*). In his writings he liked to use the imagery of the "Great Dance," especially in his fictional Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, and That Hideous Strength* ... he also used it in his most well known work, *Mere Christianity*). He liked to point out that we tend to think of the universe as a grand mechanism, but in medieval literature the picture of the universe was much more festive. Lewis noted that in the medieval mindset the orderly movements of the universe were conceived not so much as those of a machine, but rather as a JOY-ful dance, a festival. A machine is cold, mechanical, not living, no emotion. But a dance is festive, fun, exuberant, alive; people laugh at a dance. Think of a square dance or a line dance, with the joyful exuberance of cohesion and harmony of many bodies moving across the floor like a one huge, multi-limbed, happy living creature. Personally, I've always enjoyed square dancing. A square dance is most enjoyable when everyone is trained in following the caller's instructions and steps in time accordingly; one learns the steps, obeys the calls, and the dance is festive, enjoyable, even exhilarating for all.

The enjoyment of the dance loses its luster, though, when some clod insists on doing his own thing, or doesn't follow the rules, or is otherwise out of step with the rest of the square. In the square dance the order is part of the fun; following the rules, obeying the calls, and staying in step with the "Lord" or the "Caller" or the "Leader" of the Dance serves to greatly enhance the pleasure and enjoyment of the dance. Somewhere in my unfortunate generation, the "rules" for dancing kind of went out the window; the preeminent form of "dancing" since, oh, the sixties became this do-your-own-thing freestyle jiggling and flailing and gyrating and "footloosing" that's been the bane of many a self-conscious teenager and I think has really detracted from the beauty and harmony and coordination which once characterized the gracious and festive dance floor ... but, I digress.

C.S. Lewis: *"The Dance is, in short, obedience itself; one attains freedom by submitting his or her own will to the design of the universe, moving in harmony and concord within it."* True freedom and full enjoyment of life is found from keeping in step with the godly design of how things are created to be. Jesus is the Lord of the Grand Dance. Human like us, divine like God ... He dances the dance of the Universe, He's the grand Caller ... and He invites us to join Him on the dance floor, He invites us to learn how to stay in step with the divine order that was meant to give us abundant life and exhilarating joy. Again, a dance is festive, fun; people laugh at a dance. Joy is the serious business of the universe created by a joyful and loving God! On a related note, C.S. Lewis' autobiography which documents his Christian conversion is appropriately entitled Surprised by Joy.

Elsewhere in the Bible, God refers to Himself as a husband to His people ... well, He certainly is not some domineering control freak of a husband who neurotically *needs* to be loved, who constantly demands proof of love and loyalty because of His insecurities. No, God is a secure lover Who wishes to share His joy, Who wishes to lavish love *on* and share blessings *with* His beloved. **Joy** is of the essence of God's character, and joy is, ultimately, the eternal destiny of this universe He created. Of course, God knows sorrow, too. He also knows anger; the Bible is clear on that. But God is not fundamentally angry! The sorrow of God, the anger of God, these are only temporary responses to situations in a fallen world; I'm convinced He expresses sorrow and anger toward sin primarily because of the misery it brings to us, His beloved! And the causes for His sorrow and anger will one day be banished forever, along with all causes of our sorrow and anger, through His redemptive activity ... as we talked about last week, one Day He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Again, *"Joy is the serious business of heaven!"* And because He loves us, God wants us to share in that joy. *"Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down ..."* Jesus' joy, the Father's joy, that's the joy we know by the divine gift of love from above, by joining in the Joyful Dance to which we have received an eternal invitation.