

**Sermon: December 10, 2023 – Advent III - 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-24**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

When our children were in elementary school, parent-teacher conferences would often include a sheet identifying “three stars and a wish” – three areas where the child was showing enjoyment, growth and success, and one thing that could use some extra work. There was room to identify areas for improvement, but this was not a time to hammer away at a child until they did things better; the emphasis was on identifying the places they found joy and to help them build on their successes.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians – widely held as the first letter that the Apostle wrote to ANY Church – is a bit like this. Unlike some of his letters, in which he gets very pointed, grumpy, even sarcastic, Paul appears to have quite an affection for the young Church in Thessalonica, and he has a genuine empathy for their struggles. While not completely devoid of tips, admonishments and requests, the book is mostly one of grateful encouragement, Paul’s version of “three stars and a wish.”

There are times that all of us need that grateful encouragement, and in these days when the word “Church” is likely to conjure up broadly-held stereotypes of something that is negative, narrow, and opposed to any forms of diversity, science or progressive thought, there are times when I think, “but I *love* Church– it’s one of the biggest sources of JOY in my life!” In general, I don’t think I would be accused of seeing the Church through rose-coloured glasses – I am well aware that there are lots of legitimate concerns, mistakes that we have made in past and are probably making right now, and healing that brokenness will take a lot of time, effort and resources– but still; wouldn’t it be nice to find, like, ten minutes sometime to name some of the ways that JOY is to be found in Church?

Well, as it turns out I happen to have about ten minutes right now, and unless you’ve got someplace else to be, you do too, so in a spirit of gratitude, and an invitation for you to identify some of your sources of joy, here are some of the ways that Church brings me joy.

Church remains one of the best places to make cross-generational connections that are deep and soulful and joyous. No, Sunday School isn’t what it was back in the 1960s, here or anywhere in Canada, but over the past dozen years I have seen the children who have grown up in this congregation and how meaningful that is to everyone involved. Church is a place where children can make connections with people of all ages, not just other children who are basically the same age, or at most, one year older or one year younger. I see the delight in you when young adults whom you knew as children return home for the weekend and come to Church, and the joy in your conversations is obvious. And last Sunday, Steve, our guest speaker from CYAN reminded us very personally of how much it means for the young adults of Canmore and surrounding area to have the no-strings-attached support of this faith community, and the tireless mentoring of the Friends of CYAN. Those cross-generational connections, and all the ways we reach beyond our usual groupings, are so important.

Church is one of the few places these days where music is participatory. The music just rings in this place, with glorious anthems, with Tanya’s playing and with choristers dotted throughout the congregation encouraging everyone to sing out, and as we found earlier this year, we can make it pretty loud in the Banff Church as well. My musical tastes are really broad, the only thing I really hope for a community of faith is

that they love the music they sing, and I have never experienced anything like the joy that all of you express through music. At a time when an every-Sunday choir is rare, in mainline Churches in Western Canada, at least, Sunday after Sunday your music makes my heart sing.

Church is a place where divine beauty can be experienced, and that brings joy to my soul. Beauty plays out in song, in words and actions of worship; it played out when Rev John Snow Jr smudged the communion elements here one year ago, and when a circle of belovedness surrounded our first same-gender wedding nearly seven years ago. Beauty is expressed in the stained glass in Banff, particularly the wonderful new installation in the narthex, it plays out in these windows which amplify the light to the point that at mid-day it often seems brighter in here than it is outside. We see it week after week, with the beautiful seasonal decorations by Ann and John. And on Wednesday night, Evensong's interplay of words and music and silence, and a love of nature, and leadership provided by laypeople rather than me, evokes in me deep quietness in my soul, and gratitude, and awe.

In Janet Gear's Theological Banquet I am a full-on "missional", and a personality quirk of mine is that I enjoy being part of a group that is pioneering new things. So your willingness to step out and try things, from the TV installation eight years ago and the introduction of PowerPoint, to the yes you said to the amalgamation and to our "big tent" ministry meetings, to partnering with Bow Valley Green Energy Cooperative to install solar panels on the roof, to renovate Gordon Hall to be more accessible and usable, are sources of both pride and joy for me. And I can never express enough thanks to everyone who stepped up in the pandemic, to do new things in very shaky times.

Church, of course, isn't contained to what happens on Sundays, or what happens in Church. Church life has given me the profound honour to be with you in times of transition, times of new discovery, in some of your most difficult times, including times of loss, and to honour the end of lives when we gather in loving memory. Similarly, you helped me re-enter full-time Ministry twelve years ago, and held me with such love in 2014 when my Mom and my Brother died within 100 days of each other. We experience God's grace in such moments, and the abiding joy of faith.

And I recall the wise words of stewardship expert Hilbert Berger who talked about a healthy congregation being a place that empowers ministry, in which no more than 30% of what we do is "church work" and the other 70% is "the work of the Church" – the diverse range of things that disciples of Jesus do to express Christ's work of peace, hope, joy and love in the community. I am so taken by how this is shown here, both in the Church buildings and beyond. I love how the Banff building is a hub of mid-week outreaching activity – the community playschool, reaching back some 50 years, the thrift shop, a manse made ready for the Bhatti family to come live in it – what faithful use of physical space. And right from the birth of the Canmore congregation in 1891 there has been an understanding of the responsibility that comes with being a Church on Main Street. The needs of the community aren't just an "extra" to be looked at after we've got our own stuff attended to; the willingness to use the outdoor space at both Churches to be a public witness to such things as Red Dress Day and Orange Shirt Day is important and authentic, and an openness to let the Spirit make suggestions to you and to then follow those urgings, is shown by events like the candlelight vigil for the earth, here tonight. That willingness to *engage* is so good for

us, and for me, and it speaks of our connection to the Church Universal and the world well beyond these walls.

You've always been clear at how important progressive scholarship is to you, and I love being around people who are a lot more well-read than I am, and plugged into current societal and political trends and actions. Sermon-writing has always been deeply satisfying for me, a place where God finds me and makes me dig, and your encouragement in that helps me to seek joy.

What might be most joyous for me, is when these different good things cross over and more than one thing that brings joy is happening at once. For example: in late 2015 the broader community told us they were willing to trust us to be the home for sponsoring refugees. The Bow Valley Syria Refugee Project quickly had 170 volunteers, perhaps 25 from Ralph Connor and the rest from Canmore, Banff and surrounding communities, and I can scarcely describe the joy of meeting the Kahkejian family for the first time – first over the phone, then in three separate arrivals at Calgary Airport. And a recent example of crossover was last Sunday, when the choir not only lifted our hearts and spirits with lovely music, they did so on the International Day for Disabled Persons with an anthem they had been taught verbally, relying on auditory guidance without being able to rely on printed music. That combination of beautiful music and vulnerability was so moving.

That is by no means a complete list, but it's a sampling. Just like anything important in life, we do well to pay attention to signs of health or lack thereof, we name the "wishes" where we want to engage more fully with the needs of the world in addition to the "star" areas where we shine. But most importantly for me, today, is to acknowledge the wonderful gift of life that God gives us, and within that, God's wish for each of us that we find joy. There are many places in life where joy is to be found, and since the days of the Apostles, Church has been one of those places where God intends joy to be found. I thank you for continuing to make that true in my life. In Christ, Amen.

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