

above all, a *joyous* day, because Easter represents the beginning, and the end, and the beginning of the end of God's plan for all Creation. Christ came, Christ died, Christ is risen ... and Christ will come again, completing this circle of joy that is God's intended plan for *all* of us—for you, for me, and for all people everywhere.

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed!

Please pray with me:

Triumphant God, on this most joyous of days in the year, we give thanks to you for the gift of joy that is ours through Jesus Christ. Through the power of your Holy Spirit Jesus was given life so that we, too, might live—not in the pain and the suffering and the misery of our own making, but through him, and with him, in the joy that is ours through everlasting life.

Guide us, we pray, in this Easter season and beyond, to discern your will for us; grant us the courage to do your will; gift us with the faith we need to be obedient to your will, because there is joy at the end of our journey.

Amen.

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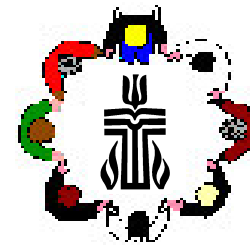
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“The Joy of Obedience”

Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Easter Sunday
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Trinity Presbyterian Church
Reverend Nancy Lynch, Pastor
6081 Ross Road
Fairfield, Ohio 45014

513-860-4114
www.trinity-fairfield.com
office@trinity-fairfield.com

Matthew 7:1-12

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 7:1-12

Six and a half weeks ago, on Ash Wednesday, Lent began—and with it, our sermon series on German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Do you remember what scripture we talked about on Ash Wednesday? It was that passage from Matthew where Jesus calls the very first disciples—Peter, Andrew, and James—to follow him.

So we talked that night about what it means to follow Jesus—that it can be *hard* to follow Jesus, because following Jesus means giving up life as we know it.

Following Jesus means swimming against the tide of public opinion.

Following Jesus means shifting our priorities such that what *used* to be important to us is no longer important to us, because our main priority when we follow Christ is *Christ*.

Following Jesus, in other words, means living our lives in complete and total *obedience* to Jesus Christ.

So then we talked about how *obedience* is a word that's very difficult for most of us in this day and age, especially here in the United States, where individuality and “doing your own thing” are far more important to us than obeying someone else—even if that “someone else” is Jesus Christ. We acknowledged that the only “obedience” we often follow is obedience not to Christ, but instead to *ourselves*.

So then we talked about how our *disobedience* makes God unhappy, so much so that God keeps sending us prophets to teach us how to be obedient—prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah ... and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

As you know if you've been with us this Lent, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a modern-

day prophet who spent much of his life studying what it means to be obedient to Christ. He wrote about obedience in the books he wrote, like *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*; he talked about obedience in the classes he taught as a university and seminary professor; and he preached about obedience in the churches he served as a pastor. Before he died, in fact, he produced an extraordinary body of work in which he explored exactly what it means for us to follow Jesus.

Bonhoeffer didn't just *talk* about being a disciple, though—he *lived* it. He took seriously Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which he claimed contained everything we need to know to follow Christ, and then he followed Christ's teachings as he understood them—even though following Christ led to his execution in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany for trying to stop Adolph Hitler.

So, for the past six and a half weeks or so, we've turned our attention to obedience. We've immersed ourselves in the Sermon on the Mount. We've explored Bonhoeffer's theology with respect to the Sermon on the Mount.

And, throughout it all, we've tried to understand just what it means for us to be *obedient* to Jesus Christ.

So much of our conversation this Lent has focused on what we have to do to follow Christ. We've talked about how obedience flows out of our appreciation for God's gift of grace—a grace that we don't want to cheapen by taking it for granted.

We've talked about how obedience is a matter of discerning God's will in any given situation—and then *doing* it.

We've talked about suffering, and the way it often seems to accompany doing God's will, because doing God's will *can*, as we mentioned, be hard.

And this is as it should be, because that's what Lent is all about—it's all about

this kind of self-examination in which we honestly and ruthlessly look at ourselves and take note of the many ways in which we're *not* obedient to Christ.

But Lent is now over. Easter has, *finally*, arrived, bringing with it not only the hope that things will, one day, be better, but the sure and certain knowledge that this hope has already been realized—this hope is already *here*—in the person of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior.

And so, today, we find that our focus on obedience isn't so much on what goes *into* obedience ... but instead, on what comes *out* of it ... namely, *joy*.

Joy. This is not something that we typically associate with obedience, is it? It's not a term we use very often, if at all, in conjunction with those images of suffering and forbearance and self-denial that we've talked about all through Lent.

However, while it's true that suffering and forbearance and self-denial *are*, sometimes, very much a part of obedience, the flip side to all of that is that suffering and forbearance and self-denial isn't all there is to obedience, because the primary of purpose of obedience is, and always has been, *joy*.

Because the truth of the matter is this—when we are truly obedient to God, when we truly seek God's will in all that we do—then the only possible outcome there *is*, the only possible outcome there *can* be, is *joy*. And the reason for this is because that's why God created us—for joy. God created us so that God can enjoy us and we can enjoy God. In other words, joy is not just part of the plan—joy *is* the plan.

We have, of course, done our very best to thwart this plan, through our persistent and continued disobedience to God, but God is so determined to make sure we have the joy God wants us to have that God took care of that, too.

God took care of that by assuming human form in the person of Jesus Christ and becoming obedient *for* us.

In his book *The Joy of Ministry*, theologian Thomas Currie writes, “For through the Cross, joy came into the whole world.” The joy of which Currie writes, of course, is the joy that is ours through Jesus Christ in whom our disobedience was reversed for all time. Because through Jesus Christ, an entire history of wrongs was suddenly made right. Through Jesus Christ, the joy that is our heritage became ours forever.

No wonder Bonhoeffer was so insistent that we seek God's will in every single second of every single minute of every single day of our lives. No wonder he was so dedicated to following Christ.

Because Bonhoeffer knew, as did Christ, as do *we*, that there's *joy* at the end of our journey—there's joy in obedience.

This is why Jesus told the disciples in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7-8):

*"Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks,
the door will be opened.*

What Jesus was giving them here was, in essence, a recipe for *joy*. *Ask*, Jesus says—and it *will* be given to you. *Search* for God's will—and you *will* find it. *Knock*—and God will not only open the door, but will escort you inside to a feast of unimaginable joy prepared *just for you*.

And so, today, we celebrate this joy—the joy of obedience that is ours through Jesus Christ. We celebrate joy because Easter is,