Find Your Joy

Good morning, everyone.

Today, I want to talk about joy.

Not happiness exactly. Not excitement, or the kind of pleasure we feel when something wonderful happens. Those things are certainly welcome, but they often depend on circumstances. We are happy when it's a beautiful day, when our family or friends gather, when our health is good, or when something we have hoped for finally comes to pass.

But joy is something a little different.

Joy can be quieter. Deeper. More enduring.

Neither Randy nor I grew up in joyful families. Anger, fear and control were more how our families of origin functioned. So when it came time to job search after college and grad school, we made a conscious decision to move far from our birth families in order to have the autonomy to write a different story for the family we were creating. I found out I was pregnant the day before we set out cross country in our un-airconditioned Uhaul truck in July. So in that way the move was truly the beginning of our new family.

My all time favorite movie is The Wizard of Oz. Do you remember how the first part of the movie is in black and white? And then Dorothy opens the door to Oz and to everything in vivid technicolor? To Randy and I, that is how our life unfolded. And Joy is what colored that life.

We understand that joy is not something that happens to you. You choose it as much as it chooses you. Fortunately over 50 years ago we had the foresight to choose to move away from what wasn't working in our lives. I think choice and perspective are really important in finding joy.

By the time we reach this stage of life, most of us have lived through a great deal. We have known love and loss, beginnings and endings, successes and disappointments. We have watched children grow up, friendships change, and the world transform in ways we could never have imagined.

We have learned that life rarely follows the plan we made for it.

We may find ourselves asking:
Where will I find joy in this stage of life? And that's a fair question. And I do believe you can find joy at all ages and chapters of life.

It’s not realistic to pretend that aging is always easy. It isn't. Nor should we feel that we must be cheerful all the time. **Grief is real. Loneliness is real. Fear and frustration are real.**

Joy does not ask us to deny any of these things.
Instead, joy invites us to make room for something more. It reminds us that even when life becomes difficult, it can still contain moments of beauty, connection, surprise, and grace.

We can be sad and still experience joy. We can miss someone deeply and still laugh.

We can worry about the future and still be grateful for the present.

Joy is not the absence of sorrow. Sometimes, it is what helps us carry sorrow.

When we were younger, we might have thought of joy as something grand.
We imagine the big vacation, the important achievement, the perfect home, the long-awaited success. We make plans for the day when we will finally have enough time, enough money, enough security, or enough freedom to enjoy life.

And then as the years pass.We begin to discover that some of the most precious moments were not the ones we planned.**They were the ordinary moments.**

- A cup of coffee and conversation shared with a friend.
- A grandchild asking us a question that makes us laugh.
- A favorite song on the radio that carries us back to another time.
- A book that gives us a new way of seeing the world.
- A conversation in which someone really listens to us.

We become less impressed by what is grand and more appreciative of what is genuine.

We understand that a meaningful life is not necessarily a life filled with extraordinary events. It may be a life in which we pay extraordinary attention to ordinary things.

The poet Mary Oliver famously asked, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

That question is often understood as a call to adventure or achievement. But I wonder if it can also be an invitation to decide to live joyfully.

Sometimes we need to be intentional about it, to carve out space for it and create opportunities for joy. One way that we are intentional is that Randy and I have a weekly practice we've dubbed "Joy Day". We put it on our shared calendar and try valiantly to not schedule anything else that day. We take turns planning our joy days. They aren't typically expensive or monumental. They are just open ended time together centered around an activity or outing. A few favorites are to take a mug of coffee to view the sunrise over the lake close to our Virginia home. Another favorite is to go by a local bakery to pick up hot apple cider donuts to take to our favorite scenic overlook on the Blueridge parkway. Our Joy days don't always involve food 🥯 A really memorable one was going to Kitts Peak to see the starry night with the unexpected drama of a 360 degree sunset that seemed to last forever. On other Joy days we've driven down a number of back roads, just to see where they go. We might discover a waterfall or small community we didn't know about, and GPS is my saving grace to guide us back home, since I'm a bit of a directionally challenged driver.

So, some ways to cultivate your own joy could begin by asking some questions:

- What will you notice today?
- Whom will you appreciate?
- What beauty will you allow ourselves to see?
- And what small moment of joy might you otherwise overlook?

We do not have to climb a mountain or travel around the world to answer those questions. Sometimes, we need only to be present where we are.

There is joy in changing our minds when experience teaches us that we were mistaken.

There is joy in standing up for what is right, even when the world seems discouraging.

There is joy in helping another person feel less alone.

And there is joy in belonging to a community like Borderlands where we can bring our whole selves: our questions, our doubts, our experiences, our laughter, and our tears.

We need one another. What is the saying…sharing your sadness, halves it and sharing your joy doubles it, something like that.

Our culture sometimes celebrates independence as if needing other people were a weakness. But the truth is that we are made for connection. We depend on one another from the beginning of life to its end.

We receive joy from others, and we have the capacity to give it.

A phone call to someone who lives alone. An invitation to join us for lunch. A willingness to hear another person's story without rushing to offer advice. A kind word to someone who has been overlooked.

These gestures may seem small, but they can change the texture of a person's day.
And often, they change our day, too.

There is one more thing I want to say.

Sometimes, as UUs, we make joy more difficult than it needs to be.

We may feel guilty about enjoying ourselves when others are suffering. We may think we should be doing something more useful.

Or perhaps we have experienced so much loss that we hesitate to become too happy. We know how quickly life can change, and we are reluctant to trust a good moment.

- But I wonder: What if joy is not a reward we must earn?
- What if we are allowed to enjoy a beautiful day simply because it is beautiful?
- What if laughter is not a distraction from the serious business of life, but part of what makes life worth living?
- What if pleasure, beauty, playfulness, and delight are not luxuries, but essential parts of our spiritual lives?

We can’t solve every problem. We can’t prevent every loss. We can’t control the course of the world, or even the course of our own lives.

But we can sometimes choose where we place our attention.

We can notice the warmth of sunlight on our skin.

We can listen closely when a friend tells a story.

We can sing, even if we no longer sing as well as we once did.

We can read, garden, dance in the kitchen. Our middle daughter recently shared with us that on mornings when her elementary age boys are extra slow getting going in the mornings, she declares a one minute dance party. She plays a song on her phone and off they go. They get silly with crazy moves, their laughter changes the mood and because the dance party just lasts one minute she can still get everyone out the door on time. **I love it!** She's starting their day with joy.

And perhaps joy becomes, in its own quiet way, a form of hope.

Not the hope that everything will turn out exactly as we wish.

Not the hope that we will never suffer or lose what we love.

But the hope that life, even with all its uncertainty, continues to offer us something worth welcoming:

- A moment of kindness.
- A new understanding.
- A shared laugh.
- A hand reaching for ours.
- A chance to make a difference.
- A reason to be grateful that we are here.

We don't need to wait for the perfect circumstances before we allow ourselves to feel joy.

We can find it in our friendships, in our community, in the natural world, in the work of justice, and in the simple miracle of being alive together.

Let's be gentle with ourselves on the days when joy feels far away. And let's be generous with joy when it comes.

May we continue to discover, at every age, that there is still beauty to notice, wisdom to share, love to give, and laughter to enjoy.

I truly believe for all its challenges, life is profoundly joyful. May it be so.