

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 4, 2022

“But Their Delight”
Psalm I

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

A question for you: we have a long history of catechisms in the Presbyterian church (those faith teaching tools, structured as questions and answers). Now if I read you the very first lines of Presbyterian catechisms written in the 1640s, how do you think those would start? What would be the first note sounded, the first theme introduced? And what if I then read you the opening of the newest catechism of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, written in the 2000s? How do you think that one would start? Hold onto your answer, as we turn to the first verse of our Responsive Psalm.

Our psalm this morning is Psalm I, the very beginning of the Psalter—and the Psalter opens by asserting that the “happy” (or, probably better, the “blessed” [אַשְׁרֵי]) do *not* do three things: they “do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or”—and I want to focus on this last part—“or sit in the seat of scoffers” (v. 1). The “blessed,” says the psalmist, don’t “join in with mockers” (NLT) or those who “sneer” (CEV) at others.

There’s a kind of hollow pleasure in ridiculing others—especially when done in the cowardly way, behind others’ backs. There’s a cheap feeling of power in mocking another person—a cheap thrill in realizing that you’re the ridiculer and not the ridiculed. And this type of behaviour is, well, rampant in our society. Online, real people are bullied and mocked and dehumanized—such that some have been driven to self-harm and some have felt they had to vacate the public sphere. Political discourse has—in many contexts—been reduced to a contest of ridicule, where those with different political views are mocked publicly and crudely.

And, shamefully, this happens in the church, too. In a previous congregation I served, someone came to the church for the very first time, and—while she was seated in the pews, preparing herself to worship God—two long-time members of the church sat down in the pew right in front of her, opened up their Orders of Service, and immediately began to mock and ridicule my selection of hymns. Right after the service, that newcomer to the church came up to me and told me about her experience, how she’d sat listening to those two misusing worship as a chance to mock the minister’s carefully selected hymns—turning the pews of the Sanctuary into “the seat of scoffers.” Can you imagine? To my surprise, she decided to come back and give the church another chance. If I were her, I don’t think I would’ve returned; I don’t think I would’ve given a congregation that acts like that a second chance.

But, although it’s immoral and hollow, there *is* a cheap thrill and pleasure in ridiculing others, in trying to push ourselves up by pushing others down; and yet, says the psalmist, the “blessed” do not seek any pleasure in ridicule: “Happy are those who do *not* [...] sit in the seat of scoffers,” says the psalmist, “but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (v. 2)—“but their delight is in the law of the LORD.” In “the law” (‘Torah’ in Hebrew)—which is God’s guidance, God’s instruction, the ways that God offers God’s “will and way” (Mays) and reveals Godself into our lives—in this, the “blessed” find “their *delight*.”

For the “blessed,” attending to God’s law and God’s revealed Word—this isn’t about drudgery or duty, this isn’t some unwelcome imposition; rather, God and God’s law is sheer “delight.” In the original Hebrew of the Psalter, this word that we have as ‘delight’ (יָדָה) is rich and wonderful: it means “delight” and “pleasure,” “desire” and “longing” (BDB)—and it also means “joy” (Pratico). “Happy are those” who *don’t* indulge in ridicule and debasement, but instead, the psalmist tells us, “their delight,” “their pleasure,” “their joy is in the law of the LORD.” To be blessed is to find joy in God! I’m reminded of a verse from a hymn: “Daily doth th’ almighty Giver/Bounteous gifts on us bestow;/His desire our soul delighteth,/pleasure leads us where we go./Love doth stand/At His hand;/Joy doth wait on His command” (Neader).

So right at the beginning of Psalm 1—at this entry into the Psalter—we find an affirmation of *joy in God*. And—not surprisingly, since the Psalter runs deep in Presbyterian piety, practice, and theology—we also find joy at the heart of the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition. At the start of this sermon, I asked you how a seventeenth-century Presbyterian catechism might start, and how our most recent catechism might start. At least for the catechism from the 1640s, you might expect that it would start with something about human sinfulness and depravity, maybe?

So here’s how the Westminster “Shorter Catechism” from the 1640s begins: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer? “to glorify God, *and enjoy him forever*.” Now the so-called “Longer Catechism,” also from the 1640s: “What is the chief and highest end of man?” “to glorify God, *and fully to enjoy him forever*.” Back in 1648, Presbyterians were convinced that the goal of human life is to glorify God and *enjoy God forever!* And how about the most recent catechism of our denomination, adopted in the 2000s? It begins: “What is God’s purpose for our lives?” And the answer? “We have been *made for joy*: joy in knowing, loving and serving God, joy in knowing, loving and serving one another, joy in the wonder of all God’s works” (*Catechism for Today*). Forget everything you’ve heard about Presbyterians being historically dour; our tradition is deeply committed to joy, to theological joy, to the joy of knowing God, to the joy of delighting in God’s revelation in Scripture. (It just so happens that we do tend to be quite serious about our joy!)

How should we imagine this joy? The theologian Jürgen Moltmann was interviewed some years ago on the topic of “the theology of joy.” He said: “‘fun’ is a superficial feeling which must be repeated again and again to last, while joy is a deeper feeling of the whole existence; you can have fun at the side,” he said, “but you can experience joy only with your whole heart, your whole soul, and all your energ[y].” He described joy as “divine [...], com[ing] from outside into our life in a surprise, in a turning from sadness to goodness, from sickness to health, and from loneliness to communion, and this turning [...] awakens [...] joy” (cf. Schiller).

Yet for Moltmann, joy isn’t something we ourselves generate but something we receive. “You cannot make yourself joyful,” he said. “Something unexpected must happen.” The interviewer, another theologian, then reflected on God’s own joy: “The joy of God,” the other theologian said, “it’s almost like a revolutionary idea, that God—the creator of all that is—would rejoice” (Volf). Then Moltmann responded, “How can we speak of the love of God if we don’t dare to speak of the joy of God, because God loves [our] joy and participates in the joy of his creation.” I’m reminded of that line from *Chariots of Fire*, spoken by the protagonist, portraying the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell: “I believe God made for a purpose. But he also made fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

And all this about the joy of God—this is key and must not be missed, because our joy comes from God’s joy. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth described God’s glory as God’s overflowing joy: “God’s

glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which [...] shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness,” he wrote, such that “[a]ll of God’s works [...] take part in [...] the communication of [God’s] joy” (II.1/647). “God’s glory is His overflowing self-communicating joy,” Barth wrote. “The objective meaning of God’s glory is His active grace and mercy and patience, His love. [...] And where [God’s glory] is really recognised, it is recognized in [...] its peculiar power [...] of giving pleasure, awak[en]ing desire, and creating enjoyment” (II.1/653).

For Barth, “the God attested in Holy Scripture is the God who Himself radiates joy” (II.1/654). And so Barth believed that it does not suffice to respond to God even with “awe, gratitude, wonder, submission and obedience” (II.1/655); because God’s glory “awakens joy, and is itself joyful” (II.1/655), it is not only “possible” but “necessary” “to have joy in [God] and before [God]” (II.1/655)—not only now but eternally: “In the eternal glory before us,” he wrote, we will “witness [...] the divine glory that reaches over to [us], rejoicing with the God who Himself has eternal joy and Himself is eternal joy” (II.1/648-649).

Today, the psalmist invites us to refuse the toxic habits of ridicule and mockery—and instead to find delight and joy in the revelation of God. Enjoy!