



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Fruits of the Spirit: Joy”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Philippians 4: 1-7; Luke 15: 11-32

July 5, 2026

Of the so many lessons I have learned (and continue to learn) through the living of life in all of its multitudinous variations, I have been particularly reminded, of late, of my ever-growing understanding of the truly insidious nature of the fallacy of perfection. The somewhat trite notion of not allowing perfection to become the enemy of good is a concept we hear and embrace from time to time, but the power of that tug to seek perfection in our lives can be so much more invasive than I think we often realize. And, lately, I've seen it in spades as we've approached this semi-quincentennial anniversary of our country.

Some 250 years ago, a group of rabble-rousers got the idea that, maybe, the colonies of the new world didn't need to remain subject to the authority (and perhaps more to the point – the taxation) of the British monarchy. Energy stirred, spirits aligned, support grew, and on July 4, 1776, they gathered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia and adopted a Declaration of Independence – an action that would set the stage for a decade of battles, controversies, and debates that would lead, eventually, to the establishment of a newly constitutional federal republic in that same Independence Hall, 11 years later.

The story that followed is one of both great success and tragic failure.

- The country that saw its President Abraham Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, is the country that had enabled and capitalized on slavery for a century prior to that date, and that country would continue to systemically disadvantage that same population for a century yet to come until the great successes of the Civil Rights Movement took hold in the 1960's.
- The country that formally adopted a woman's right to vote by establishing the 19th amendment in 1920 is the same country that had limitations to those rights for 150 years leading up to that event and that, decades later, would take 25 years from the time credit cards were invented before a woman was able to hold such a card in her own name.
- The country that eradicated polio and leads the globe in medical advances is also the country that is among the highest contributors to pollution, climate change, and other contributors to the very diseases we end up battling.
- The country that connected the coasts with interstates and drove the 'American Dream' of home ownership is the same country that operated under Jim Crow laws and red-lined communities.

- The country that stepped into the fray to topple the Nazi regime and bring an end to the second world war is the country that would itself end up mired in its own wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and more.
- The country that inspired Henry Ford's invention of interchangeable parts and the moving assembly line is the same country that would put corporate profits and productivity ahead of worker health and safety for generations until collective bargaining truly took hold.
- The same country that led the space race to the surface of the moon is the country that would watch the space shuttle Challenger explode on live television some 17 years later.

I could go on with these all morning, but the point is that the 250-year history of our country is filled with a rich and remarkable legacy of spurring freedom... and prosperity... and ingenuity... and invention... and... and... and... At the same time, however, the 250-year history of our country is incontrovertibly laden with moments of oppression... and segregation... and abuse of power... and mistakes... and failures... that remind us of the humanity of not only our institutions, but of all who serve and reside within them. There is no honest reflection on this semi-quincentennial anniversary that can ignore that those 250 years have been filled with both great success and tragic failure. The challenge I have seen, more and more, leading up to this weekend, however, is what seems to be a growing refusal to acknowledge that truth.

The two camps have emerged again. Now, I'm very aware that there is a huge portion of our population that exists between those polarized extremes that tend to get all the airtime, and I suspect that many, if not most, in this room are drawn to that more nuanced perspective on things. The public discourse, however, has allowed patriotism and the celebration of this anniversary to be defined by one set of voices decrying our country as some sort of abject failure while the other seeks to whitewash our history and depict the US as some sort of idyllic country on a hill shining its glorious light on the world around.

Bringing this back to where we began, I increasingly see this dialog succumbing to that temptation of focusing on perfection with one side seeing the imperfect as evil and the other ignoring the imperfect altogether. Or, if I can say it another way, the choice of what people are looking at is defining what they see – which is what brings me beyond this moment of the semi-quincentennial and into the wider point our faith speaks to both this moment and so many more in our lives to come!

Now, those paying close attention might be wondering what any of this has to do with Paul's second fruit of the Spirit. I promise – we're getting there! We are in week three of this endeavor into Paul's nine fruits of the Spirit. We talked about love two weeks ago, and today we come to joy. We need to pause for a reminder, however, of the underlying principal that stands behind Paul's concept of living in the fruits of the Spirit. Paul sets this up as a choice. We have to choose, Paul says, between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit. These aren't spiritual gifts or some sort of innate symptom of faithfulness, these are distinct choices that we make as to how we are going to live out our faith. We must choose to bear that fruit of the Spirit that is joy. We must choose to live in joy – and that brings us back to that notion that what we choose to look at defines what we see.

Consider, if you will, that parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus shares. We know this parable pretty well, and there are all sorts of details that can rightfully draw our attention and reflection. The man has two sons: the older dutiful son who fits the mold of the good son and does everything right and the younger, more feral, son who wants to wander with the winds and live it up in the whim of the moment. The older son continues to serve at his father's side. The younger son heads off and gets himself into all sorts of trouble. Eventually, that younger son runs out of money, dignity and options, and he comes crawling back to his father. That errant path is worth our consideration. That younger son's humility is worth some reflection. The father's grace and forgiveness is a wondrous reminder of that which we know in God. What I want to point towards this morning, however, is what comes next for the father and the eldest son.

The father sees his wayward son returning home. He sees a broken young man who has returned for a new beginning. He sees his beloved child, who had left, who is once again standing in his presence. And, what does he do? He rejoices. He throws a party. He celebrates the son's return.

The older son, on the other hand? He sees a brother who took advantage of his father. He sees a brother who bolted for life's momentary pleasures and left him holding the bag. And he sees a father who's lavishing all of this attention on his good-for-nothing sibling while ignoring all that he, the good son, has done each and every day along the way. And what does he do? He decries his father's grace, he succumbs to his anger over his sense of betrayal, and he refuses to even partake in the festivities to which his father had invited him.

My point? The father saw a wayward son returning, which caused him to rejoice. The older brother saw the sibling that had squandered his blessings coming back for more, and he was livid. My point is that what they chose to look at defined what they saw, and what they saw defined the very experience they had of the moment. Said another way for our purposes today... What they chose to look at determined what joy, if any, they would know in the circumstances at hand.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

There's an interesting causal implication, I think, in these words from Paul. Coming to God with rejoicing (starting with a stance of looking at the good), allows us to come honestly to God with our needs, which opens the door to the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds. Said in my terms, choosing to look first at the good allows us to more honestly and peacefully acknowledge the bad, which in turn more fully opens the door to God's work and presence within it all. Let me say that again... Choosing to look first at the good allows us to more honestly and peacefully acknowledge the bad, which in turn more fully opens the door to God's work and presence within it all. That, I suggest, is what it means to choose joy!

The reality of life is that the fallacy of perfection is exactly that – a mirage... a false hope... an unachievable litmus test to which we are too often drawn. The reality of life is that we have to take the good with the bad and we have to take the bad with the good. The other reality of life, however, is that the choice of what we look at will invariably define our experience of the circumstance at hand.

Choosing joy isn't some Pollyannish delusion that ignores the failures for the sake of purporting some false perfection, but it is setting aside that pull towards that fallacy of perfection and allowing ourselves to see the good... the hopeful... the possible... and all the positive that rests amidst the shortfalls and failures that are undeniably present. Choosing joy is focusing on the gift of the broken son returning home and not the memory of the departure that took him away. Choosing joy is not whitewashing the history of our country and depicting as that idyllic city on the hill, but it is focusing on the victories, blessings, and wonders amidst that broken story that can shape even greater gifts and successes in the still yet unfinished story of our nation yet to come. Whether we are talking about the grandeur of the semi-quincentennial, or whatever human moment may be next in our daily lives, choosing joy is starting with a spirit of rejoicing, owning with God the brokenness that remains, and allowing that full truth to enliven God's Spirit of peace, promise, hope and possibility to flourish within it all.