

Camp Mennoscah Sermon - Little Joys

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Good morning! It's great to be here this morning and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to speak here with you all again. I bring greetings on behalf of the camp mennoscah board and on behalf of our director, Olivia Bartel.

I love that I am in this position because I get the opportunity to share with people the joys and the exciting new things happening at Mennoscah. Camp is such a fun mix for me of two of the aspects of God that hit home for me the most, community and creation. Community, of course, is at the root of what makes camp so great. What other times in our lives do we get this dedicated time to be in relationship with one another without the other distractions of life around us, without judgement, without hate. Camp is a place where we are embraced for who we are—and what makes us all so wonderfully unique.

I think one of the best examples of this are through the countless unique smiles we see year after year out at camp. No one is the same, but all help to share the joy we strive for. I recently went through camp's photos to update some pictures for camp, and had a great time sorting through these smiles. It honestly provided a challenge eventually, since I could only select so many for the project I was working on.

Here are some wonderful photos of some of the smiles we've been lucky to see this summer: You'll notice I've included some of our church members here. These are all photos from this summer but these smiles are something that don't change at camp year by year, a testament to the community being built out at camp. I'll talk a little more about these smiles later, but I think they share the goal of camp for me, joy in community.

This year we've been lucky enough to host 340 campers across all our weeks of summer camp, from age 8 to 18, from all sorts of different backgrounds and life circumstances, all together in one place as a community. We've also been blessed by the help of staff members and hundreds of volunteers, who continually help to keep important ministries like Camp Mennoscah running smoothly. We truly couldn't do our work without these people, and thank you to all of you who have a hand in this.

So there's a little taste of the community we've seen this summer, what about the creation? The easiest way to explain it is that we've experienced a Kansas summer. I'm sure many of you remember the news of the storm damage at the start of June. Thanks to the hard work of summer staffers and volunteers we were able to get those limbs cleaned up, but nonetheless it made for some wet camp weeks. We have also seen the ever-present sun that we are used to seeing in

midwest summers. Through all of this change camp has still seen the constant presence of God and God's people. I personally feel God easiest when I'm out in nature of any sort. It makes God's presence so noticeable, so tangible.

As I was thinking about camp and what scripture to focus on this morning, I found myself thinking of themes for camp. What themes fit best with life out at camp mennoscah? Or what fruits of the spirit can be applied the most, if we were to borrow Paul's terminology. The difficult task for me was that so many, in fact all of them can be applied to camp, as they often are to our wider everyday lives. In fact, we have a whole song about the fruits that we sing at camp, and it would perhaps be an interesting challenge to pick one at random and write a message about that trait. As I continued to think, however, one did stick out to me: joy.

Thinking of joy led me to one particular section of words from the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah, and his companions write words to the leaders of Jerusalem and Judea it is this joy that is spoken of readers are invited into living lives of abundance. "You shall go out with joy." - Isaiah 55:12.

I'm sure many of us are familiar with this verse, perhaps the tune that is often associated with it, and this invitation to go forth with a smile. And this seems pretty straight forward right, what's easier to do than smile? I do find, however, that more and more we forget about the power of joy.

As I was reflecting on this verse I realized it might be helpful to give a brief overview of the context we're reflecting within. This is because, at least speaking personally, Isaiah 55 stood out to me, but I wanted a little more context. Why should we go out with Joy? So, what do we know about Isaiah?

For starters, Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, during the latter stages of Israel's Kingdom period. Isaiah, as we know, is what we call a prophet. Biblical prophets aren't necessarily fortune tellers, but instead people who speak for God. Through this relationship with God, Isaiah developed a focus on two main ideas: Judgement, and Hope. It's a safe assumption, based on the sermon title, that I'm going to be leaning on the side of hope this morning, but it's important to recognize this division. Isaiah's somewhat complicated structure can be understood through these two themes, split down the middle by one event, the Babylonian exile.

In chapters 1-39, Isaiah speaks of Israel's judgement and potential hardships, all culminating in one big event, yes, the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. However, here's the good news for the Israelite people. Post exile, or chapters 40 onward in the book of Isaiah, are filled with our messages of hope. Hope for a land that flourishes with peace, a land free of warfare, a land where justice is present not through retaliation but through restoration. While we certainly don't have time to dive much deeper into Isaiah, I think it's worth noting the shift in mindset from Old Jerusalem, filled with anger, jealousy, idolatry, and violence, to dreams of a New

Jerusalem, a new place filled with hope for peace. What could Jerusalem possibly gain from something like the Babylonian Exile, from the fall of their land? For Isaiah, the answer seems to be renewal. A once tall and mighty tree of Jerusalem is now a scorched stump, prophesied to be first cut down by Assyria, then promptly by Babylon. God, however, says to Isaiah that this stump will eventually function as a Holy Seed. Sure it's only a small fragment of hope, but it is a start nonetheless.

But what is this seed of hope that is spoken of in Isaiah? This seed is something new. We know that Isaiah's predictions come to fruition, that Babylon eventually does take these Israelites into exile. We also know that Isaiah's dreams of a fresh start also have the chance to take hold. However, after their return from Babylon, people are still hard hearted and rebellious. So, we learn of God's plan to do a new thing. This new thing, this seed, is a messianic king. This king shifts focus from might, power, and revenge, to humility, peace, and servant leadership. In other words, the description of Jesus as a seed is an accurate representation of the principles he represents. In fact, in chapter 53 of Isaiah we go on to read of faithful servants and partners with Jesus being described as seeds as well. Power in small, faithful acts. Not large displays of military power and control, but little acts of love, and kindness. Little joys.

As I get older and older I find that, just as little everyday acts of faithfulness result in a more in-tune follower for Isaiah, little acts of joy carry so much more importance for me, both in terms of faith and other aspects of my days.

I'm often reminded of the power of little joys as we enter the fall season. At this point, once it hits August I'm ready to announce the change of the season. I'm ready for cooler weather, fresher air, and football season, even if, realistically, it is currently September and 95 degrees this morning. As I've been thinking about the importance of joy, my personal emphasis on joy and the numerous passages in the Bible focusing on this emotion, I've been allowing myself to feel this excitement over the changing of the seasons. I don't know if we ever take the time these days to acknowledge the power in these little moments. The loudest voices always seem to be focused on big things, big results, big fights, big emotions. They say think big, but I think we might lose something if that's all we do. I want to allow myself to feel the little joys. I think we do ourselves a disservice when we don't.

As I've further immersed myself into this new role I've been reminded of this fact. I've been reminded of how much of Camp Mennoscah's ministry is achieved through the little things. For example, I've been up to Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp a couple of times this summer, and am always amazed by the grandness of the mountains around me. Just large statements of God's creation all around you. And as much as I love the river and love the sunsets out at Mennoscah, they are perhaps less jump-in-your face, and more love-as-you-discover elements of creation. What is jump-at-your-face at Mennoscah, is people going out with joy. Camp is filled with the

wonderful parts of life that society is perhaps trying to convince us are small and unimportant. For example: smiling, silence, silliness, moving slowly, listening to one another, I could go on. These are all little joys in my life that I'm convinced I would have to work much harder to find if it weren't for a community like the one I've found at camp. And I'm grateful that I have had the opportunity to feel these joys, as I think they make all of our lives more full.

“For you shall go out in joy
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

I love the imagery used here and I can't help but place myself into the natural items being described in this poetry. I can't help but put myself in the place of a tree of the field, or perhaps the bank of the river. If I myself was the water of the Ninnescah how could I not clap my hands when I witness God's love so evident in the laughter and the play of the community present? If I were a mountain (perhaps a hill is more realistic for Mennoscah's sake) how could I not burst into song when I feel the feet of campers and staffers alike moving over me; living, moving expressions of God's love? Living and moving evidence of people growing in their faith and in their relationship with one another.

At Mennoscah we go out with joy and peace. And I am so happy when I see that same joy and peace outside of camp. It's a part of the people that participate in camp. I still remember always being amazed, and continually am amazed by the number of campers who will still come up to me and say hi. Some of these people haven't seen me in a couple years, and still remember the week we shared together a couple summers ago. How do we strive for a world full of justice and peace? - The little things: sharing memories from one hot week in Murdock, Kansas.

I personally am grateful, because it's not hard at all to pitch Camp Mennoscah, which makes my job a lot easier. If you've been there for long enough, surrounded by the people there, in most cases you'll continually be drawn back. My favorite way to visualize this is through photos. Luckily for me, Camp's Facebook page has a wonderful tab where you can access camp photos from up to about 15 years ago. While I was searching through the photos, I came across a few from Junior 1 camp in 2016 that stood out to me.

This is my fiancée Emma, and I, at the same camp 10 years ago. So, we technically met at camp before ever meeting in college. Anyway, I like looking at pictures like these because they remind me of how influential camp can be for young people. If Emma and I were lucky enough to enjoy this I want our future kids to experience these joys as well.

Before I close I want to take this time to thank you all, as a church and as individuals for all the ways you contribute to Camp's ministry. Thank you for all the ways you have donated your time, efforts, and resources to further our mission. It's because of people like you all that those two on the screen got to continue to enjoy all camp has to offer, witnessing God through community and creation. It's because of volunteer work, of donations, and sending your children to camp that more people get exposed to these little joys, so thank you again.

My encouragement for you this week, as we leave this place, is to embrace the little joys in life that bring you closer to God and others. Maybe calling a friend, having a family game night, or donating to camp mennoscah :). I think there's something special and significant about the call we hear at the end of Isaiah. The Israelites aren't instructed to go forth and conquer, to go out with power and strength. No, they are being called to go out with joy, led by peace. I don't want to make broad assumptions but joy and peace seem like a good basis for many of our decisions in life. If we can't control the larger powers in this world, maybe it would be of benefit to focus on the little joys every once in a while. May it be so.