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***Joy Together***  
***Romans 12:4-18***

<sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we **are members one of another.** <sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup> the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

***Marks of the True Christian***

<sup>9</sup> Let **love** be genuine; hate what is evil; **hold fast to what is good;** <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; **pursue hospitality to strangers.**

<sup>14</sup> **Bless those** who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> **Rejoice** with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> **Live in harmony** with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; <sup>17</sup> do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, **live peaceably with all.**

Last week in worship, we talked about the importance of listening to one another, and listening to God.

This week we continue that theme, ***but in a new way.***

For the next six weeks,

we're going to be talking about different ways to listen to God.

We'll use a book called ***"Joy Together" by Lynne Baab.***

I love the title—because it's exactly what we are doing here in our new merging church—finding *Joy Together!*

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, we'll start a 6-week Wed night Bible study on this book, and everyone is invited to join in! You can find the book on Amazon.

Lynne Baab's premise is pretty straightforward: ***We need one another.***  
And when we come together in the body of Christ, ***we find joy!***

One way we find that joy is by *listening to God—together*.

So I wonder, what do you think of, when you *hear the word discipline*?

Is it positive or negative?

For many people, discipline doesn't sound good at all.

So when you hear the phrase, *spiritual discipline*,  
you may not think of something joyful.

But Lynne Baab reminds us that spiritual disciplines  
are *just ways of LISTENING TO GOD!*

They are ways of *seeking God first* in our lives,  
as we are asked to do by Jesus, in Matthew 6:33.

She quotes Marjorie Thompson from her book *Soul Feast*,  
Who says that spiritual disciplines are *practices that train us in faithfulness*.  
Now, don't we all need that?

She mentions Tony Jones who writes that *spiritual disciplines are just like playing  
a sport or a musical instrument—practice deepens our faith*.  
Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 6-7

She says because *our lives are gifts from God*,  
We are called to live for God and for one another,  
By doing spiritual disciplines.

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 13.

There is *power and purpose in doing spiritual practices together*.  
When we do them together,  
We deepen our community,  
We deepen our faith,  
And we find joy!

And remember, how joy is much *deeper than happiness* for Christians?  
Happiness is about what **HAPPENS** to you---it's based on good circumstances.  
*Joy, on the other hand, is a gift from God.*  
Joy can be found, *regardless* of your circumstances.  
You can experience God's joy in the *best*, and the *worst*, of times.  
And we can experience God's joy *together* at any time.

Baab reminds us that we can find that joy---*when we listen to God together*.  
Specifically, through different spiritual disciplines.

So what is a spiritual discipline besides a practice that trains us?

She mentions six ways that we hear from God:

In the disciplines of:

*thankfulness, fasting, prayer, Bible study, hospitality, and Sabbath-keeping.*

*These spiritual disciplines bring us closer to God,*

and closer to one another,

when we practice them together as God's people, the body of Christ.

*Let me give you an example.*

When we take time for *prayer*, before all of our meetings,  
and we include *gratitude and THANKFULNESS* for God's blessings  
(instead of just asking for what we need),

that helps us grow closer to God and to one another, you know?

It gives us a *different perspective*—God's perspective.

It makes us *more thankful* in all the other areas of our lives.

Or, when we take time to *study SCRIPTURE through Lectio Divina*,

where we hear a passage out loud,

and we meditate on it to hear what word, what image,

and what God is saying to us----

*That too, helps us grow closer to God and to one another.*

Because we learn from each other's insight.

When we ask the congregation *to pray and FAST* before an important decision or  
holiday, same thing.

When we practice *Sabbath-keeping*, and encourage Sabbath time,  
we grow closer to God and one another.

So these six practices that Baab mentions, are powerful.

This is *where the Joy comes from*---from growing in faith and community.

*And community for Christians is NOT OPTIONAL, it's required.*

We need one another.

Paul says in Romans here, and elsewhere,

that we are all members of the body of Christ,

And members of one another.

Those are not just nice words—that is a FACT.

***The very word for church in the Bible is meaningful.***

Ekklesia, in Greek, means *called out*.

It means being called out together, from your home, into a public place.

It's a gathering of people called out into the world.

But what if we thought of it ***as a VERB, not a noun?***

As an ***ACTION***, instead of a thing?

After all, we are not just people hanging out together in a group.

We are called into the world together, ***to do God's work!***

As Christ followers, ***we are called into a special community.***

And ***Romans 12:4-18*** tells us how should live in that community.

We are asked to live out all of these imperatives we heard today.

My Bible calls this section ***"The Marks of a True Christian"***, things like:

*holding fast to the good, bless those who persecute us,*

*Love one another, rejoice, have hope, persevere in prayer,*

*Show hospitality, live in peace, and so much more.*

***So we are called into community—but not just any gathering.***

We are called into a ***specific WAY OF LIFE.***

With directions, and guidelines—that we find here in Romans 12.

Baab says we are also called to **answer 2 QUESTIONS together:**

***What is God up to?***

***And how can we join in?***

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 13.

Have you ever thought about that ***FIRST question—what is God up to?***

Maybe we've all wondered that at one time or another?

I know I have!

But what about the ***SECOND question—How can we join in?***

Do we think that way about our faith?

That God is up to something great, and ***we are asked to join God in it?***

***Sometimes we make our faith so personal,***

so much about our individual lives,

That we forget about *joining God's work* in the world!  
 We forget about *becoming part of something so much bigger* than ourselves---  
 The mission of Jesus Christ in our world.

*And the only way we can truly know that mission,*  
 The only way to know what God is doing, and join it--  
*is to ASK GOD.*

We have to ask God, and then *LISTEN for the answer.*  
 And we all know about listening in prayer----  
 But Baab reminds us that we need to also pay attention to the people and the world,  
 all around us.

*We need GOD-SIGHTINGS*, as we call them in Pathways—  
 those moments when we catch sight of something amazing that God has done—  
*a gift of love, a beauty in Creation, a reconciled relationship, a new opportunity.*  
*We need our eyes open to pay attention to everything around us.*

*And, we need to pay attention to the PEOPLE,*  
 who so often speak God's word to us:  
 our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.  
 This is where Lynne Baab is so wise---*we DO need one another.*

And there's a really amazing surprise that happens in people around us.  
 Remember when Jesus spoke about *caring for the least of these, in Matthew 25?*  
 When he said, *whatever you have done for the least of these,*  
*you have done for me?*  
 In other words, *JESUS HIMSELF is found in the people* around us!

I wonder--*when have YOU seen Jesus in another person?*  
 What about in a person *in this body of Christ?*

*This year during our stewardship season,*  
 we will have opportunity to share what we *LOVE* about our church,  
 And what the people in this church *MEAN* to us,  
 And what *HOPES AND DREAMS* we have for this newly merged church!

*But let's think about all of that right now.*  
*What DO you love* about this congregation?  
 Is it the fellowship? The welcome? The love? What is it?.....  
 Anyone want to just call something out?

*I wonder, what do YOU think that God is up to in this place?*

And how can we join in?

*And what DO the people in this church mean to you?*

When do you *see God, or Jesus*, in them?

When has Jesus reached out to you,

through one of your brothers and sisters in Christ in this place?

Was it in a call? A kind word? A hug? A meal?

*What IS God up to here?*

And how can we join in?

And what about *our HOPES AND DREAMS* for this new congregation?

What is God up to in that?

And how can we join that?

Of course, the circle extends well far beyond our walls.

We work through *COG*—the Community Outreach Group.

We work through the *Matawan Food Pantry*.

We join in the *CROP walk* --making people aware of hunger,

And raising funds to fight food insecurity for our neighbors here,

and around the country.

*And these are just a few things that God is up to---*

What else is there?

And how can we join in?

*How do YOU THINK we could use spiritual practices* to listen to God,  
for those answers?

How could we be more **THANKFUL**?

How could we practice **FASTING**?

What about increasing our time in **PRAYER**?

Or in the study of God's **WORD**?

How can we show greater **HOSPITALITY**?

Or keep the **SABBATH** each week?

*Maybe we can grow over the next six weeks, in new ways—*

Through worship, and study together.

Maybe the book, *Joy Together*, and it's wisdom,

Along with scripture,  
Can change our lives in some new way?  
And open our minds?

And maybe it will help us to answer the two questions:

*What is God Up to?*

*And how can we join in?*

*One thing is for sure.*

When we do *find those things that God is doing—and we join them---*  
*we find JOY.*

When we even seek God in any of those spiritual disciplines—we find joy.

*We are made for community and life together.*

And there is definitely joy to be found—right here, together.

*For the gift of life together in the body of Christ,*

All God's people can say, Amen!