

The Joy of Being Busted
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and we lit the rose candle, the candle of joy. Christmas is supposed to be a season of joy, but if you spend any time looking around you at the local mall, joy is not exactly what you see on the faces of most of the shoppers. When most people talk about the joy of Christmas, they're really talking about a fleeting sort of happiness that is grounded in the festivities of the season – the decorations, the gifts, and the old favorite Christmas carols. But I think the joy we await is of a richer and more elemental sort. If you've looked at the title of this sermon I'm sure you're wondering what joy and being busted could possibly have to do with each other. I'll explain with a story.

My earliest childhood memories are of a two-bedroom apartment I lived in with my parents and my older sister. Since this was in the late 1950's, a safer and more innocent time, by the age of six I was permitted to go out and play by myself within a reasonable distance from the apartment, provided I didn't cross the street. I was even trusted to come home when I said I would.

Just up the street from our apartment was a playground where I would regularly go to meet my friends and play. Just down the street was a shallow creek. I was absolutely forbidden to go to the creek. Now, as you left my apartment, you went right, up the hill to go to the playground. The creek was to the left, down the hill. Over time in my exploration of the neighborhood, I discovered that if you continued past the playground and followed the back streets, you would eventually come to the creek, and without crossing any roads – also, without passing by our apartment.

So, as you might guess, it wasn't long before I began telling my mother that I was going to the playground, but going on around to play with the kids who were always at the creek. The playground was fine, but it couldn't hold a candle to the creek. It was everything a creek was supposed to be. There was a huge log across it at the terrifying height of about three feet, which we would dare each other to walk across. There was a heavy rope with an old tire that swung out over the water. The creek disappeared under the road in a huge metal pipe that you could yell into and listen to the echo.

Even though I had fun at the creek, going there all the time eventually began to bother me. I felt bad about lying to my mother (of course, not bad enough to stop what I was doing). Since this was in the day when all the mothers knew everyone else's kids, I was constantly worried that someone would see me and tell my mom.

Although at that age I didn't know the word "stress," I was feeling it. I needed to be on constantly on guard around my parents, so that I didn't let slip anything that might clue them in to my secret.

Fate stepped in one day when I accepted a dare to cross the log, and slipped off. Fortunately, I landed on my feet, but in about 6 inches of muddy water that soaked my shoes and the bottom of my jeans. If that wasn't bad enough, it started to rain, hard, as I walked home up the hill. As I approached our apartment wondering what I was going to tell my mother, I met her. She was running down the hill from the playground. It seemed that when it started to rain, she had gone up to the playground to get me.

Either my mother wanted to be fair, or she simply wanted to make a point, but she first gave me the chance to tell her where I'd been, even though it was patently obvious from my muddy shoes and pants. I told her that when it started to rain I had come right home from the playground – by taking the long way around the back of the apartments. I was not much on logic at that age. "What about your wet shoes?" my mother demanded. Thinking quickly I responded, "Well, it's raining really hard!" But it was no use. The game was up. I was busted.

By now you might be wondering what all this has to do with joy. Here's the thing. The next few hours were some of the worst for me – listening to my mother express her disappointment in me for betraying her trust, feeling ashamed at my own willful and ongoing deceit, and doing my lonely penance in my bedroom. But when it was over, and I told my mother I was sorry, and she hugged me, I was relieved of an anxiety I'd felt since the first time I'd begun going to the creek. I felt forgiven, and loved. I was back in the family.

Of course, this story really involves a relatively minor transgression, as transgressions go, although to my childish mind and emotions I was carrying an unimaginable burden. And as we become older, the secrets about how we really behave and live are more grown-up, but not substantially different. As adults we may find ourselves trapped in a web of lies, an addiction to alcohol or drugs, infidelity to a spouse. There are all sorts of things we feel that we need to hide from others, and they're large and small. The secrets we sometimes guard inside us can cause us to live anxiously and to build barriers against others, even if all we're hiding is the fear that we're not really as capable, self-assured, or just plain perfect as we want everyone to think we are. If you've ever borne a burden like that that was finally exposed, then you know both the pain, and the joy, of being busted.

It sounds almost nonsensical, doesn't it? I watch those crime shows on television all the time, and I've yet to see someone having handcuffs slapped on them say, "Wow, am I so relieved that you caught me!" It's paradoxical, like much of what we talk about in here. But you see, when our weakness is exposed – when circumstances shine the harsh light of reality on our lives, our defenses are down,

and our rationalizations and excuses are all used up – that is the moment when a forgiving God steps in. That is the time when healing and personal growth can happen. More specifically, that is the time when we can begin to be restored to right relationship – with others, with God, and also with our selves. Relationship is where joy lives, because relationship is what we were created for.

Experiencing the joy in our relationships is what the practice of this season is about. We might expect that, because the incarnation is all about relationship. It's the reason God became one of us, and lived with us. It's right there in the very first verse of a Christmas song by Charles Wesley that we'll be singing in just about a week – probably Wesley's greatest hymn – "Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." That's it. The meaning of Emmanuel, "God with us," is that the family can finally get back together again.

Today we encounter John the Baptist in the gospel for the second week. John is still warning everyone repent, to turn back from sin. Which raises an interesting question. What is sin? Oh, I know, we can all name all kinds of sins. But have you ever tried to define it?

Here is a simple and useful way to look at it. If we were made for relationship, then sin is anything that intention. Sin, at its most basic, is a violation of relationships. All sin is a violation of our relationship with God, who asks us to honor him, and calls us to live after the example of Christ. Just about any sin you can name – envy, deceit, selfishness – is as a violation of our relationships with others. You'd be hard pressed to come up with a sin that doesn't fit the definition.

We can see this in the dialog that John is having with the crowd in today's reading. The people respond to John's warning to repent by asking him a question: "What shall we do?" Listen to how John answers them. He tells the crowd to share their food and clothing with those who have little. He warns the tax collectors not to collect more than they are required to. He tells the soldiers not to abuse their power. All the examples John gives today have to do with respecting relationships. What he is describing for them is rebuilding and restoring the loving community God created them to be.

Because that's where joy is found. Joy is being back in the family where you belong. However repentance happens – whether we get busted like I did coming home from the creek, or we turn ourselves in – we are relieved of the burden of all our pretenses, all our self-centeredness, all the things about ourselves that we desperately want to keep hidden, all the things that shut us off from others. And we can lay them at the feet of the God who wanted reconciliation with us so desperately that he became one of us. Joy is the thing that happens when we are cherishing and protecting the relationship that God made us for – the very thing our hearts long for. Advent is the season of Joy because we await the child whose coming can reconnect us – with God, with each other, and with our truest and best selves.