



Webs not Walls

Week 4: God is Joyful

Heather Blair - 09/07/2026

Good morning. We're going to do things just a little differently this morning. I've come up with what folks around here call "one of my cockamamie schemes." And I would be mad about that, except it's the name I came up with myself.

So, I'm changing the order up a little bit. We'll get to our song of preparation here in a few moments, but I wanted to give a little bit of an introduction first.

We're in the middle of a sermon series called "Webs Not Walls" that is inspired and informed by this book, *Woven—Nurturing a Faith Your Kid Doesn't Have to Heal From* by Meredith Miller. We've distributed 100 copies already, but we got some more this week, so if you haven't gotten one yet, please do!

We know not all of you are parents, but this book offers wisdom beyond that. First, we're part of a community here—a family. We think the intergenerational nature of this community is one of its greatest strengths. We're all here to nurture each other's faith—whatever our ages. And, this book offers some healthy principles toward doing that. Second, we're all always nurturing our own faiths. We may have picked up some terrible habits on that front—speaking to ourselves with harsh judgments and

endless lists of shoulds. Or—because of past hurt, or busyness, or any number of reasons—maybe we aren't nurturing our own faith much at all. Not to mention anyone else's. We hope this series can breathe some fresh air into those spaces.

We've talked about a couple of Meredith Miller's big ideas. One being that many faith traditions are obedience-based. Whether explicitly or by implication we get taught that our biggest concern ought to be our sins. Identifying them, getting them forgiven, and then becoming well-behaved little Christians. We learn that God can't really love us while we're misbehaving, so we work hard at obeying so God will be happy with us and give us a happy life. Which is a world view that often crashes with time and experience.

Miller invites us to trade that paradigm for one that is trust-based. It starts with learning about who God is and how God loves, inviting us to trust this God *before* we ever consider our own responses or growth. Early on she says our goal as we read the book is:

"To be with our kids as they get to know God and discover if God can be trusted."

For our purposes we could say that the goal of this series is to be with each other *and ourselves* as we get to know God and discover if God can be trusted.

The first big idea from the book is encouraging that paradigm shift in what we nurture. Instead of blind obedience, we work at relational trust.

Brian talked about the second big idea last week. That in order to make that shift, we might have to reimagine the way we collect, organize and use the things we learn about God. We can form them into a wall—with a feeling of lots of certainty and control but also the likelihood of crumbling with age. Or, we can use them to make a web, which allows for greater flexibility—far easier to adapt and repair as needed.

Miller describes building that web with anchor points that we discover through our trust-based development. In that paradigm, we start with experiencing who God is and what attributes of God are reliable.

That requires one more shift from us, involving the way we read (and teach) the stories of the Bible. Meredith Miller points out that with kids (but also with ourselves) we generally take the approach of centering our attention on the *people* in the story. How do we identify with them? What life lessons do they teach us? And we draw conclusions like, “Be faithful like Abraham, be brave like Esther, don’t be arrogant like Saul.” God turns into someone outside of the story, judging whether the humans are being obedient enough to have success. But, that gets it all backwards. God is the center of these stories, not the people. He is not outside judging, he is inside engaging. Miller says it this way:

“The point of the Bible is not to provide principles, but to tell the story of what God is doing in the world. Real, regular humans are important characters in the story, but God is the central character throughout.”

The storytelling way of almost all the writers in the Bible is to put us in the story so that we can experience what the ancient people experienced *with God*. When we get caught up in comparing ourselves to those people, we pull ourselves right out of the experience and into obedience mode. Shame mode. Pride mode. We’re offered chances to get to know God, but we miss them in our efforts to please God, to appease God, to control our image to God. Not a great trade!

So, for the rest of today—and for the rest of this month—we are going to explore some of the anchoring characteristics of God. We’re going to do that hoping to nurture trust not obedience. To build webs not walls. And to get to know God instead of worrying about if we please someone who already loves us beyond all measure.

If that doesn't call for a cockamamie scheme, I don't know what does. So, here we go.

Today the anchoring characteristic of God I want us to consider is: God is joyful. And one of the ways we know this is how often the kingdom of God gets described like a big party, a banquet, a frivolous, exuberant celebration. So, we're going to try to bring a little bit of that into our experience this morning. A good party needs some music—so band, come on out—y'all can stay seated, but they're going to teach us a new joyful song. We probably also need some decorations and noisemakers. And, what's a party without a refreshing beverage? So, sit back for a few minutes, enjoy the song, give the fellas your beverage request and once we're in a party mood, I'll come back up to help us look at this joyful God.

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God is joyful. How can we know that?

We can see evidence of God's joy all over the Bible.

In the Old Testament we find God breaking after each movement of creation to say, "This is good." God makes room for celebration, for savoring, for delight. In the Psalms and Isaiah we find writers likening being fully in the presence of God to being invited to a feast, a celebration, a party full of food and drink. In the book of Nehemiah we have the story of the Israelites rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem after returning from exile. As they finish, the priest Ezra reads to the people from the Law. It seems like they do that thing of centering themselves in the reading, because all they can hear in that reading is their own condemnation. They weep for all the ways they've fallen short. But Nehemiah and Ezra stop them. "You're missing the point!" they seem to say. "We read the law to remind ourselves who God is, and what God promises. We're not here to be bowed down in shame, we're here to celebrate God's faithfulness." It sounds like this in Nehemiah:

“Nehemiah the governor, along with Ezra the priest and scholar and the Levites who were teaching the people, said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to God, your God. Don’t weep and carry on.’ They said this because all the people were weeping as they heard the words of The Revelation.

He continued, ‘Go home and prepare a feast, holiday food and drink; and share it with those who don’t have anything: This day is holy to God. Don’t feel bad. The joy of God is your strength!’”

Even people who don’t know a whole lot of Bible often know that one. The JOY of the Lord is our strength. Hard to manage if God isn’t joyful.

The joyful God becomes even clearer in the person and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus goes to parties, he makes dear friends, he invites people into the spaces where he is—and they come. One time, a huge crowd gathers wanting to hear Jesus speak. Before he gets to his message, Jesus comes up with his own cockamamie scheme (that’s how I like to think of it anyway). He gathers his Scheme Team—in this case one young boy with two fish and five loaves of bread—and says, “Let’s feed all these people.” And they do! With twelve baskets of leftovers besides. What is that if not a picture of the generosity of joy? The people didn’t do anything to earn the meal—they hadn’t even sat through Jesus’ message yet. He fed them just because he loved them. That’s how the joy of God works.

Meredith Miller says:

“God’s people, connected to God’s joy, do wild things that are possible only when you trust in the joyful abundance of God. Joy is a marker of the kingdom among us, a new reality that we’re invited to access at all times, simply because it matches who God is.”

“Invited,” is almost a refrain when it comes to talk of God’s joy in the Bible. We’re invited into joy, we don’t obey our way into it.

One of the places this is most obvious is Luke 15, which starts like this:

By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

Jesus actually goes on to tell three stories—the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each story includes the invitation, “Celebrate with me!” An invitation to join in joy. And each of the characters who make this invitation represent God. They show us what God is like.

God is like a father with two sons whom he loves dearly. One of the sons finds life at home restrictive and tedious. He goes to his father and says, I’m out of here—but first, I want what’s mine. Let’s pretend like you’re dead and you give me my inheritance right now. And the loving father does.

It’s probably no shock that this son goes off and wastes all his fortune. After all, the real fortune is to be raised by this sort of father, but he has absolutely wasted that. Why would money be used more wisely?

The wayward son tells himself he’s going home because he knows the servants get treated well there. He can earn that decent treatment! Let’s remember not to identify too much with this person in the story though. We might be tempted to get caught up in judgment and shame there. Instead, let’s refocus on God. In the person of the father.

Who sees his son coming from far off, and his heart bursts with joy. Togetherness is what the father wants! What is financial inheritance to him? They’re about to be together again! Oh what joy! Bring on the cockamamie scheme! Let’s have a party! Let’s all celebrate together!

This is the joyful nature of God. Who is as shocked by the older son's jealousy as he was by the younger's greed. Because they *both* miss the point. They both settle for some short-term boost when what's on offer is the joy of togetherness with God. God who rejoices at our coming together *however* we get there. This is the strength of God's joy: we have access to it at all times just because it matches who God is.

God is joyful. It's not all God is, but it is always God. I don't mean for this message to say that you should always be sunny. That you should be able to scrounge up joy no matter what you're going through. I'm not here to teach you a morality lesson, remember? I'm here to be with you as you get to know God and discover if God can be trusted. Can God be trusted if God is always joyful?

One of my favorite books on the parable of the lost son says this:

"God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found."

-Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*

In God, joy and suffering can sit right next to each other. A longing for justice, and a celebration of each petal of a daisy. The agony of our cruelty to one another, and the hope that we will do better. It all fits in there.

Today, we consider joy. Hear the call of "Come celebrate with me!" Know that it means we are always invited in to God's joy no matter what else may be going on in or around us.

This is who God is—an instigator of joy, someone who invites us all to the feast. And, on that note, we have saved the best of this party for last, the invitation for us all to share together in Communion. The Lord's Supper. The Last Supper which was also the first.