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**Lent 5 A, March 26, 2023**

**Liturgy 10: "Drinking Tea – Sanctuary and Savoring"**

**Read James 1: 16 – 18 and/or memorize James 1: 17**

When you come into worship now, how does it feel to you now? We spent a lot of money to do the renovation. Should we have used that to feed hungry people, help the homeless or the poor? Yet there is a long history of churches doing both, caring for those in need, while making a space worthy to be used to worship God. It reflects the importance that God has in our lives. Beauty was part of God's plan for His creation. We need only look around us to see that.

Our chapter is about with pleasure. We have a complex relationship with pleasure. It's important to us and we like it, but it can also take over our lives and lead us away from God. Oddly enough, it can turn into an obsession, "where we overindulge the less pleasure we find."

Pleasure was meant as a gift from God. As Tish says, "Pleasures are deep human response to an encounter with beauty and goodness. In these moments of pleasure – of delight, enjoyment, awe and revelry – we respond to God impulsively with our very bodies: 'Yes, we agree! Your creation is very good.'" ... "A culture formed by the Gospel will honor good and right enjoyment, celebration and sensuousness."

At the same time, in our culture that values work, there is sometimes a feeling that taking time out to enjoy oneself is sin. Many, outside the church, have the view that Christians don't believe in fun, pleasure or enjoyment. We know they have a misunderstanding of Christianity.

What do you do for pleasure? Is it like Tish, a cup of tea or coffee, a book, a walk in the park, watching a movie, going out with friends, skiing or boating? How does God feel about you enjoying yourself? I hope you would respond that He absolutely loves it.

Tish quotes from C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, "The senior demon Screwtape scolds his underling for allowing his patient," that would be a Christian, "the smallest experience of pleasure – a walk in a beautiful place, tea, a good book which he reads because he enjoyed it and not in order to make critical remarks to his friends."

Lewis goes on "both pleasure and pain, says Screwtape, 'are unmistakably real and therefore ... they give the man who feels them a touchstone of reality.'" This is to be avoided at all costs. Screwtape goes on, "though small practices of enjoyment may seem trivial, yet the demon sees in them, 'a sort of innocence, humility and self-forgetfulness.'"

Now here's the dilemma as Tish sees it, "We are hedonistic cynics and gluttonous stoics. In our consumerist society we spend endless energy and money seeking pleasure, but we are never

sated.” God meant pleasure and beauty to fill us to satisfaction. They are offered as gifts from Him.

Pleasure that hurts or abuses self or others is not in God’s will. Pleasure that gives joy, refreshment, renewal, helps to grow friendships and all the positive things that please God, are part of His plan.

From the very beginning, all that God created was meant to give pleasure. It gave Him pleasure and joy to create it. At the end of each day, He declared it good, which meant it contained the essence of God.

When He saw that the man did not have a helper, equal to himself, He created one. He established a bond that was meant to last for life. He placed Adam and Eve in the Garden to work in it for their pleasure as they served Him. Work was not some burden, but gave the joy of accomplishment.

We need only look at John 2 to know that God included joy in our lives. At a wedding, Jesus makes wine out of water. In this grape growing region, we can appreciate the pleasure of that wine. Jesus often eats and drinks with friends and those who invite Him to dine. Does that sound like someone opposed to pleasure?

As we watch Jesus gather the disciples, He eats and drinks with them. They walk and talk together, taking pleasure in each other’s company. One way we experience pleasure is by helping. The pleasure of helping is actually hardwired into us because we are created in God’s image. It gives God pleasure as we use our time, talents and treasure to serve Him by serving others.

Who of us has not appreciated the beauty that has been created in our sanctuary through the hands and labors of many people? Our goal was to make it a more attractive and pleasurable space in which to worship. There is more yet to come.

Who of us has not come upon a scene in nature and found ourselves taking in our breath at the beauty and joy of seeing it? God gives us many ways of experiencing pleasure in our lives.

God intends them to be there for our enjoyment. It was His plan from the beginning. I may be a little biased here but I think we live in one of the most beautiful parts of the world. The four seasons, the beauty of His creation and the wonder of how it has been fashioned, shaped and formed provide us so many opportunities to enjoy it.

The church is not against pleasure and sensuousness. After all, God did create woman and man. But those things are to be used in the way God planned for them. They are meant to bring about the very feelings that God created in us. When we see beauty, we are enjoying God’s creation and reflect God Himself in it.

What gets in our way of pleasure? Sin! Our brokenness and our need to control, leads us to miss or misuse the beauty and pleasure God gives us. It's like walking through life, wearing blinders. It distracts from what God wants for us. He wants us to enjoy the journey of beauty and pleasure, not just the destination. It is in discovering beauty that we are frequently surprised by pleasure. It's at those times that we may be awestruck.

That very word reminds me of God because I am in awe of Him, as I hope you are also. How can a God who created everything take delight in something as simple as you, me or that little flower coming up?

One of the things that we gain as a liturgical church is, like the seasons of the year, we also get to see seasonal change. We see worship change as we move through those seasons; the feelings that they reflect. Lent, often thought of as a more somber time, will change in two weeks into Easter, a season of joy. The altar will be covered in living plants, grown from bulbs, which remind us of the resurrection. What appeared dead, now break forth in all their beauty to give our altar and worship space new beauty.

Through our worship, we learn to enjoy beauty and to respond to it. We embrace it through the music, the words we hear, through the joy we share as we gather together. In worship, we see the direction that God has put into us for enjoyment by directing it toward the One who alone can quench our thirst for pleasure. Through Jesus, He assures us that we will get to spend that time with Him forever.

Perhaps you have found yourself in a sanctuary, not just this building, but rather in a place you feel is holy, a place set apart where you feel, see and taste the wonder and beauty of God. You may use it as a place to get away so you can have a moment of quiet. In those times you are able to really appreciate the beauty and glory that God has surrounded us with.

The wonderful thing about the beauty of God is that we just need to pay attention. We want to take the time, we've heard that word often in Tish's book, to appreciate all that God gives. When we begin to be cognizant of it, an amazing thing happens. We see more beauty, sometimes in the most infinitesimally small things. Perhaps it is a special place in your heart, or a special person in that place that helps you to know you are connected to the divine.

Perhaps, you call to mind that verse from scripture in James 1 that, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming from the Father of lights." In that moment, you respond with gratitude. It fills your heart with such joy that it overflows.

The danger we face is giving in to Satan. He wants to fill us with anxiety and inattention. He wants us to miss all those theophanies that we get when we are paying to attention to God and His creation. He wants us to have no pleasure or to use it for abuse. The devil hopes we will take it for granted and forget these things because without them our adoration will diminish.

So, like anything we want to get better at, we need to practice. We want to stop focusing on the destination, so we can enjoy the journey. We want to be more graceful to ourselves, not

beating ourselves up when we take a few moments away from accomplishing something. We don't want to focus on more tasks in the hope that we will finally gain approval, while missing the focus on the bigger goal of enjoying time with God.

We want to remember that it is not always about giving up something. Sometimes, it is better to take up the practice of pleasure, rather than feel it is a sinful pleasure. We want to make time and space for that pleasure to enter our lives.

God gave us pleasure as a gift. But as in any gift, we want to receive it but not overindulge in it. We don't want to get caught in the traps that the devil sets for us as he seeks to take us away from God.

Consider this, along with pleasure, we need discernment. As we practice enjoyment, we also practice discernment to know how to rightly enjoy this pleasure well. We remember that the tiny enjoyments, prepare us for the much greater ones.

Tish brought up an interesting point which I really had not considered. "That as our "culture" increasingly rejects the idea and language of truth, the church's role as a harbinger of beauty is a powerful witness to the God of all beauty." The mission of the church is to make disciples, yet along with making disciples, we are to enjoy the beauty, grandeur and awe of all that God has done.

By recognizing God's work of beauty, we become alive to the God, who desires and provides all good things. May that great news always inspire us to enjoy Him.

Count me in: (Do one)

1. Keep a gratitude diary or journal of the pleasures, beauty and joys you find.
2. Set aside intentional time this week to do something you find lovely, pleasurable or delightful.
3. Taste, smell, or look at something pleasing or beautiful. Journal about it or talk about it with someone.