

Sermon Title: **“In Joy: What and Who We Are”**

Bible: **Isaiah 12:2-6 & Luke 3:7-18**

When: on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2024

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube Live Streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. Are We Open to Criticism?**

This is the season of Advent and Christmas. This is also the season of looking back on this year. And it is the time of annual evaluations for many companies. At least for the United Methodist Church, it is the time of the Annual Church or Charge Conference. So, we had our Annual Church Conference last month. And in January, 2025, our church needs to send in our statistics report for 2024. For pastors, it is time for evaluation, which includes pastors' self evaluations, and the evaluation from SPRC, the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the District Superintendent. Do you like getting an evaluation about yourself? Are you open to any feedback? Sometimes, it can be not only positive, but also negative. Are you open to any criticism? Some criticism can be constructive, but it can also just be hurtful. We love to hear people sing our praises, but it is very difficult to listen to feedback, evaluation, and criticism.

In today's Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist's first message was criticism or blame! We might assume that this blame was directed at the religious leaders at that time. But if we look

at this passage more closely, it was not directed at the religious leaders. Surprisingly, it was said to the crowds, the normal or good people, who came to be baptized. When you hear blame or criticism, what is your response? Do you ignore it? Can you listen to it? Do you defend yourself, make excuses, or deny it? Do you attack the person giving the criticism?

What was the crowds' response in today's passage? What they did was to ask questions, "Then, what should we do?" They were looking for a way, not focusing on their feelings or personalities, but focusing on the issue! Even though this happened right away in this story, I believe that in real time, they took more time for listening, reflection, and emotional management. When we tell the story, we cannot share all of the details, and we need to remember that there is something more written between the lines. When the crowds heard the critical message of repentance and bearing fruits, surprisingly, what they did was to accept the criticism and to ask questions. To ask questions after criticism is difficult. But it is not impossible.

The first surprise to me from the Gospel of Luke was John the Baptist's criticism of the crowds. The second surprise was the crowd's response to the criticism, which was to ask questions. And the third surprise was John the Baptist's answers. The first answer was to share the extras: if you have two, share one. When was our first time to learn to share? We might not remember, but since we were preschoolers, we learned to share, right? Is this something new? No. How about the answers to the tax collectors and soldiers? John the Baptist's answer was not something new, but very basic: Not extortion, no harassment, and

no blackmail. I believe that nowadays, our tax collectors and soldiers follow John the Baptist's guidelines and our current rules. But if I ask you who among us in our society are like tax collectors and soldiers in today's scripture reading, is someone coming to mind? As we know and experience many times, to do the basics looks easy, but is often difficult.

## **2. What We Are & Who We Are**

To listen to criticism, to ask questions, and to accept it is very difficult. It takes time, wisdom, and courage. To distinguish what we are from who we are might be helpful. Many times, productive criticism is about what we have done, not who we are. What we are is important, but criticism cannot define and change who we are. Remember that it is not just about you. Thankfully, I have a wonderful SPRC, our Staff Parish Relations Committees from both churches. When I hear any feedback, both positive and negative, it can and will be the opportunity to improve what I am. So, I am so blessed and thankful for our leaders and our churches.

However, occasionally, I meet a few people who do not know what I am and who I am. When I introduced myself as a pastor of this church, a few people shared negative and invalid criticism. As you know, I am not an 'American,' but a Korean, and I have a Korean accent. When I officiated at a celebration of life of a church member, one feedback that I received was, "Seriously? We couldn't get someone else?", which was kind of "Why you?" It was a comment on the livestreaming at the beginning of the celebration, way before sharing my message of hope and grace, about our loved church member whom I knew, worked with, and

served the church together. I assume that person might have been expecting an “American” pastor who does not have any accent. This criticism was very hurtful at first, but it did not remain valid. I realized that it was not about me. I believe that it was about what we think of as “Americans” and “English.” What do “Americans” look like in our minds? Can a Korean not be an American? What does “English” sound like to us? If there is an accent, can’t that English with an accent still be English? And can’t a Korean who has an accent be a pastor in the United States? Just in case, no worries. I know that I have an accent. To communicate with all of our congregation in English better, I will not stop improving my English, while accepting a lot of positive and productive feedback. Thanks to your listening ears, I am sure that my English will improve more and more.

### **3. “I Am Not”**

It is very difficult to listen to criticism, and it is also very difficult to give criticism. We do not like either kind of criticism, to have to give it or receive it. We want to be kind and nice, right? But sometimes, there is a time to share feedback or criticism, negative as well as positive. How was your experience when you gave your feedback or criticism to someone, especially to someone whom you know? Did that person take your feedback well? Or did that person defend him or herself and make excuses? Do you want to give them future feedback? I believe that everyone knows that good medicine is bitter to the taste. Please remember that it is bitter! To give criticism also requires time, wisdom, and courage.

One thing that we can learn from John the Baptist when we share feedback or criticism is

the attitude of self-denial and saying “I am not worthy.” John the Baptist knew who he was and what he was. He was not the Messiah, but a prophet. Here, the prophet does not refer to the kind who speaks the future ahead of time, but to the one who delivers what God wants to share. What he did was just to deliver the message. Whether others accepted the message or not did not depend on him. In reality, we do not want to criticize others, because we want to be good, nice, and kind, and we do not want to ruin the relationships with others. As always, there is not enough time to love each other. But if you want to share, please remember that you are not the Messiah, but whether the other person accepts the feedback or not is not dependent on you. If your feedback is accepted, please be thankful, but if not, you do not need to be disappointed. And please remember that God loves all of us, and that we are all God’s beloved ones, and that God will take care of all of us in God’s time and God’s way.

#### **4. The Source of Joy**

When we receive criticism, it is very helpful to remember what we are and who we are. When we give feedback, it is also very helpful to remember what we are and who we are. We are not the Messiah. We are not perfect, and we cannot be perfect. But we all are God’s loved ones. Then, we can accept some hurtful criticism, because compared to who we are, the criticism can mean little. What we do is not meant to correct others, or to save others, but to share God’s love, mercy, and grace. Then, we can share our criticism with love. But please remember that God is our salvation, and our Lord is our strength and our might. Because we are all God’s loved ones, we are joyful not because of what we are, but because of who we

are. Because God uses us, we are joyful, not because of what we do, but because of what God does. During this season of Advent and Christmas, let us remember what we are and who we are. It will give us joy that we cannot explain.

### **Closing Prayer**

Loving and living God, many times, we struggle with feedback and criticism, both positive and negative. We remember the trust between John the Baptist and the crowds. We also remember that you are our salvation and our strength. Please be with us as a source of joy. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.