

**Marjo Anderson, Pastor Salem Lutheran Church**  
**Jeanette “Momma J” Harris, Lay Licensed Minister, Genesis Gospel Cafe**

**Pentecost 7**  
**John 10:1-10**

**19 July 2020**  
**Picnic Grove, 3160 Park Avenue**

**“Amazing, Awesome, Abundant LIFE!”**

*Momma J:* When you arrived, hopefully you noticed the plant in the middle that had the welcome sign right across the top of its basket – with those pretty red petals, looking absolutely beautiful. And then I brought out a plant that...uh...isn't looking too well.

*Pastor Marjo:* ...that's because it belongs to me ☹ ...

*Momma J:* ...and it's been inside away from sunlight, away from tending, away from being cared for. And then I brought out another plant that looks pretty good, wouldn't you say?

*Pastor Marjo:* That's because that one is yours! ☺

*Momma J:* It looks like it's alive and glowing and strong. Well, what does that have to do with us today? We talked last week about seeds and sowing and good soil. If you look at those plants you would say one of them, maybe two of them, are in good soil.

[But before we go any deeper than that I just have to give a praise report. How many of you were here last Sunday? How many of you witnessed the miraculous event when Pastor Marjo tripped and fell and bounced back up?

*Pastor Marjo:* (laughs)

*Momma J:* I was so grateful that she was the one who did that because if I were the one I'd probably still be down there! But in doing that we've got this beautiful upgraded ramp where neither one of us has to be afraid. So I'm grateful and I want to say, “Thank you, Pastor Marjo!”

*Pastor Marjo:* Thank you for falling???

*Momma J:* Thank you for falling and jumping right back up! Scripture says, “In all things give thanks”, so I am grateful in an odd sort of way.]

But looking at these plants, two of them are alive and one of them is just pretty on the outside. That one in the middle? It will go through any storm, it can rain on it, you can throw it down and shake it and get it back up and it will probably look the same...

*Pastor Marjo:* ...but not forever.

*Momma J:* Not forever...

*Pastor Marjo:* ...because of what happens with silk plants. We actually have a silk ficus tree in our narthex. And what happens is that overtime silk plants get faded and the leaves drop off, and once they all drop off, there's no more silk plant. It doesn't reproduce. It's pretty, but it's not alive.

*Momma J:* It's beautiful, it's pretty to look at, but there is no life in that plant. There aren't any bees coming to pollinate it. And if the leaves start to drop off, it doesn't matter if you give it more sun or more shade, or more water or less water, or better soil, you can't make it better because that silk plant is not alive. It's not going to grow.

The other two plants are a different story.

That one there that is trying to grow, that is trying to hold onto life, which might be representative of many of us here today. We want to grow, we want to flourish, we want to be strong and healthy, but we're struggling.

And then the other one that is healthy may be representative of many of us as well – those who may be planted deeply in God's word, planted deeply in prayer, planted deeply in praise, planted deeply in the life that Christ talked about which is an abundant life! And part of that abundance is...what? Joy!

*Pastor Marjo:* Joy!

*Momma J:* Joy!

*Pastor Marjo:* Joy – a joy that doesn't depend on the situations that we are in, that doesn't depend on what is happening around us! It has no correlation with that actually. Happiness and pleasure come from the things that are around us, but joy – joy! – is something that wells up inside and it doesn't matter whether things are going well in your everyday life, in your relationships, in your job, in anything. It doesn't matter if things are going well or poorly, when you have joy in the Lord it's like this never ending spring – like the Samaritan woman who came for water at the well and Jesus said, "I can give you water so that you will never be thirsty again!" And she was filled with joy and she ran to share that joy! She couldn't wait to share her joy!

I have to share something with you. I think you all know that I grew up in the Lutheran Church. My dad was a Lutheran pastor and a bishop, I went to a Lutheran college, I worked at a Lutheran camp, I worked in eight Lutheran congregations. I went to seminary because I wanted to study music and liturgy because they were so beautiful. And my life as a Lutheran has been wonderful, but there was always something missing. I'm not saying I didn't have the Spirit, because I believe that from the moment I was conceived God was knitting me together in my mother's womb. I believe that when I took my very first breath, it was the breath, the wind, the spirit of God. I believe that when I was baptized as an infant those waters nourished the spirit that was in me. But basically, as Lutherans, I was taught to appreciate the beauty of beautiful silk plants.

We wonder today why the church is in decline. What happened to everyone? Why have people left the church? Why have youth left? Why have people of color left? Why have LGBTQ people left? Why are churches shrinking? Why are they closing?

My theory is that we are a silk plant that is getting to the end of its life. We still look like a plant and there's still some beauty there, but it's faded and there are petals and leaves dropping off, and there's not much left of it. And the thing is, when petals and leaves drop off a silk plant, there is nothing you can do about it because it's not alive. With a real plant, you can have leaves drop off, and you can have leaves that are a little yellow and wilted, but there's still hope.

A couple of years ago I got to know Momma J a lot better and I got to know Pastor Simmonds. And both of them come from a tradition that is different from Lutherans or other mainline Protestants. (I mention mainline Protestants because it's not just Lutherans who are struggling. It's Congregationalists and Episcopalians and Methodists and Presbyterians and Baptists.)

Anyway, Momma J and Pastor Simmonds had something I didn't have. When things went wrong in my life, I got depressed. When things went wrong in their lives, they still had this joy! And I wondered, what's that about? What is that? I want that! And as Scripture says, "Seek and you will find, ask and it will be given to you, knock and the door shall be opened". And so I asked. I said, "God, I want that joy!" And God poured the

Spirit into me in a way I had not known before. You know the story of Pinocchio, the wooden boy who suddenly became a real live boy? That's how it felt. That's how it felt.

And things in me changed – like all of the sudden I wasn't afraid of the future. I don't know what will happen with our building. I don't know what will happen in my career. I don't know what will happen in my husband's career. I don't know how we will pay the bills. I don't know what's going to happen with this pandemic. I don't know. But...I have a trust in God that goes deeper than what I had before. And I give thanks and praise, and there's a passion in my heart to share what I've found and there's a peace that I didn't have before and there's joy.

You may wonder why I dance. You may think I'm silly, that there's a screw loose or something, but it's just that there is so much joy that I just have to let it out! And I get my exercise, and get my steps in, so there are some other benefits, too, but mainly it's just because of joy. Especially in this time when as a musician I can't sing except by myself – it's another way for me to enjoy the music that God has given us

*Momma J:* Amen! It's interesting how people will say I have joy in my life and someone will look at them and say, "Maybe you should let your face know about it? Could you let your face know about the joy inside? Could you let someone know that you have found a real joy in knowing Jesus Christ? Now maybe you don't have that joy, but you are still connected to the church or maybe the church building. But understand this: we are the church. The church is not the building. We are God's church. And as we go about day by day, if nobody knows it, if nobody knows that we represent Christ in our daily activities, in our daily conversations, if no one knows, why are we keeping it a secret? If we're keeping it a secret, then perhaps we're more like silk flowers. Perhaps we just come to church on Sunday and we look good with everyone else.

But I trust God's Spirit will challenge you today to stir up the gift which the Lord has planted within you, to stir up that part of you that may be wilted or dying. Find the water of the spirit in your life. Find the water of God's Word in your life. Find the water of praise in your life. So the next time someone sees you they will say, "Oh my goodness, there is something different about you!" and you can say, "I am connected to the abundant life that scripture talks about – a life of peace, a life of joy, a life of excitement, a life of standing on tiptoes to see what God is going to do next! I am not relaxing in what God has done prior to, but I am excited, saying to God, "I can't wait to see what you're doing! I am praising you in advance! I am giving you thanks and praise for what you are going to do! I don't want to be just an artificial flower. I don't want to be a Christian who just goes through the motions. But I want to be alive! I want that abundant life! And the first way to find that is to say, "God, your Word says that you came to give me abundant life. I want it. I want it! I may not know totally how to get it, but God, I want it!" And that's the first thing. Or you may just say, "I'm fine just being pretty".

*(laughter)*

So I'll tell you to look in the mirror again!

*(more laughter)*

You may say, "I'm fine just the way I am". But understand this: somebody else needs the life that you have and if you're not able to share that, then you're just an artificial plant, you're just there taking up space, you're just there saying "welcome", but you're not welcoming them into abundant life – and that's the life that Christ is offering to each one of us. Amen! Amen! And Amen!