

JOY

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Today is a day of joy, the joy of a wedding, my wedding with Sue. The joy of family and friends, and of my joy in you, Grace Baptist, who has been my beautiful community of faith for a year and nine months. So what else could I preach on this day but JOY?! Let it be full.

Mary Oliver counsels us in her poem “Don’t Hesitate”:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy

don’t hesitate. Give in to it....

whatever it is, don’t be afraid

of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb. ¹

Let joy, at least for now, drown out CNN, FOX News and MSNBC. To read the news is not a command of the Lord. But hear Jesus:

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full (John 15:11).

And Paul wrote from prison of all places:

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice (Phillipians 4:4)!

The kingdom of God is many things, justice, mercy, peace; it is also joy.

I

Jesus preached the Jubilee of God. What was the Biblical Jubilee? According to Leviticus 25, on every 50th year there was a Jubilee year. Lands lay fallow, slaves were set free, debts forgiven and land was returned to its original owners. It was a time of what I call *deliverance-joy*. So let's first focus on that, the joy of deliverance.

Jesus echoed the biblical Jubilee in his inaugural sermon in his hometown, quoting Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and (indeed) has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

Isaiah 61 was itself prophesying Israel's deliverance from Babylonian captivity. And indeed it happened. So the exultation :

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord...

for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation

...has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings up its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise
to spring forth before all nations.

(Isaiah 61: 10-11)

The joy of deliverance

We remember historical days of jubilation. V.J. Day and the end of W.W.II. Do you remember seeing the iconic photograph of the sailor in Times Square that day kissing the nurse he found in the jubilant crowd?

Or the day the Berlin Wall, which divided East and West Berlin, came down and the Cold War began to thaw, with people dancing in the streets.

And what about more personal days of jubilation? A deliverance from addiction, or severe illness. You hear the doctor's report: Five years clean of cancer, and you can't keep back the tears of joy.

Deliverance may be large or small. Spiritual deliverance as you move from what Nouwen called a House of Fear into a House of Love. Or,

deliverance from the dangerous cold of a homeless night on the streets and the welcome of food and friendship.

Jubilee in the Bible is always aspirational. We're not sure if the Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25 was ever carried out. But it was God's dream for ancient Israel, as God has a dream for America today.

And there was Jesus proclaiming it again in that hometown of his, a sermon which ended with people enraged, carrying him out of the synagogue and trying to throw him off a cliff. (Preaching is always a risky proposition.) Jesus' hometown wanted jubilee without justice; jubilation without mercy.

II

But God's salvation comes to us in two forms, says Professor Claus Westermann: Salvation as Deliverance and Salvation as Blessing. Not just in big dramatic acts of deliverance but also in the everyday ordinary (but not so ordinary) moments of blessing. So we move to the *joy of blessing*.

A wedding, the birth of a baby or a grandchild. The call of a friend to say "I love you." Everyday healings so small that we often forget to say thanks. A Band-Aid is a testament of healing on the way. Or, the blessing,

not small: the 47 years of Grace Baptist Church, a place of witness, service, worship and dear friendship, and yes grace!

Or the blessing of this world itself. A sunset that surprises. Or the “round jubilation of [a] peach”, as one poet put it. ²

Poets activate such joy. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote of the beauty of a fall day: “O World, I cannot hold thee close enough.” Or Mary Oliver:

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.

I would almost say that they save me, and daily. ³

Salvation as Blessing. How can we not *jubilate*?!

III

Then there is the joy that is not only a gift, but also an act of courage. How can one be joyful in the face of personal pain, or the pain, horror and cruelty of the world? But joy, miraculous joy, persists amid the ruins.

Kibiyashi Issa writes:

We wander
The roof of hell
choosing blossoms. ⁴

Dorothy Thompson, famous journalist of the 1940's, observed a friend in France, a woman serenely happy despite having experienced much misfortune. She exhibited, wrote Thompson, "that most beautiful form of courage, the courage to be happy".

Poet Jack Gilbert says:

We must risk delight....
We must have
The stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of the world.

Then he adds

...To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.⁵

The blessed who hunger and thirst after justice need especially the psychic and spiritual energy of joy.

So let us not be afraid to be joyful in the face of life's pain. It is no affront to God.

IV

Speaking of God...There is what I would call *mystical joy*. The joy of oneness with God—which is also oneness with life. These are moments of self-transcendence. In his autobiography, *Confessions*, Augustine, writing to God wrote: “You are deeper in me than I am in me.” Mystical joy happens in moments given to us, in music, in worship, in solitude when we connect with the God who is deeper in us than the “I” of us. The ego falls away; we are “lost in wonder, love and praise”.

I think this was what Jesus was talking about when he talked of joy, when he prayed that we may be one with God as he was one with God. Such mystical joy is not given to the “mystics” alone, but to us all.

V

There's one more kind of joy I wish to talk about. David Brooks, the N.Y. Times journalist, calls it *moral joy*.⁶ It is the joy of living according to our best and highest values. It is the joy of being engaged in a cause greater than ourselves, the cause of justice, truth, beauty, peace or love. Perhaps you've wandered onto the wrong road, or crash landed, and by the grace of

God find your way again. Have you ever gotten lost in the woods and after a frightful time of frantic search found the familiar stretch of path again?

Jubilation. Moral struggle, followed by moral joy.

The recovery movement has that wonderful phrase: “Do the next right thing.” We cannot undo the wrongs we have done. And we cannot plan all the right moves for the rest of our lives, but we can do “the next right thing”, and when we do we experience moral joy.

This is the opposite of what we might call moral smugness. Moral smugness is about human perfectionism: “Look at what I have achieved!” But moral joy knows that it all comes from God. There is no room for moral smugness, only gratefulness and humility.

Some churches are possessed with moral smugness. They pride themselves on their righteousness and look down upon others. But churches of moral joy face honestly the human moral struggle and support each other along the road that leads to life, wholeness and health.

When I think about the moral joy of engaging in a cause greater than ourselves, I think of Grace Baptist, engaging the great cause of the kingdom of God. In your mission of love in the world, from befriending the poor to protests, to standing up for those forgotten and despised in the world. What

I think you have felt was moral joy. Your address is more than 719 Club Drive. You live at the corner of Love and Courage.

VI

Where do we find the source of joy, of jubilation? I think it comes from God and the ever near kingdom of Heaven.

The Baal Shem Tov was the founder of Hasidic Judaism. It arose in 18th century Europe during a time of danger and persecution of the Jewish people, but it was marked by ecstatic joy, singing and dancing. The Baal Shem Tov said,

Leave sorrow and sadness. Man must live in joy and contentment, always rejoicing.

He was asked why Hasidic Jews always break into dance and song, swaying when they pray—even under difficult historical circumstances. And he told a story—as rabbis are wont to do.

Once a musician came to town, a man of immense talent but unknown to anyone. He stood on the street corner and began to play.

Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away. Soon a larger crowd gathered. They began to move in its rhythm. Before long the whole crowd was dancing wildly in the streets.

A deaf man walked by and wondered: “Has the world suddenly gone mad? Why is everyone jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in the middle of the street?”

Then Baal Shem Tov said, “Hasidic Jews are moved by the melody that issues from every creature in God’s creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to exist?”

If we exult in jubilation it is because we hear the music of the kingdom of Heaven coming, as God comes, in justice, joy, beauty, peace and love. It is the distant song that, by God’s grace, dwells in our hearts.

When we come to worship the first movement of worship is Praising, Thanking, Blessing, Awe and Delight. May it never end.

VII

The first miracle Jesus performed in John’s gospel was turning the water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana. The joy of the kingdom of God, he said, was like the joy of a wedding feast. Like today. In his novel

The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky wrote of this miracle. “Ah, that sweet miracle! ...He worked his first miracle to help men’s gladness. He who loves [us] loves [our] joy.”⁷

And now, in a few minutes, Sue and I will be wed. It will be in the labyrinth where the winding path leads to the center, and to God. It symbolizes pilgrimage, the journey of faith. This marriage is a point in our pilgrimage of faith. When two are wed later in life, winding paths, not straight lines, have led them together. God bless all our winding paths that lead to joy.

Footnotes:

1. Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate”, *Devotions* N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2017, p. 61
2. Li-Young Lee, “From Blossoms”, *Joy: 100 Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 154
3. Mary Oliver, “When I am Among the Trees”, *Devotions* op. cit., p 123.

4. In *Joy: 100 Poems*, op. cit., p.XXII
5. Jack Gilbert, “A Brief for the Defense” in *Joy: 100 Poems*, op. cit., p. 36.
6. David Brooks, *The Road To Character* (N.Y.: Random House, 2015)pp.XVI-XVII, 262.
7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (N.Y.: Heritage, 1949), p.277.