

What About the Joy?

Luke 24:33-43; Matthew 13:43; Philippians 4:4-7

Last week we heard the Easter Gospel from Luke read by our four young ladies, Ava, Autumn, Ruby and Naomi. They closed with the exclamation: “And they were happy!” The room was filled by joy.

Joy is one of the gifts of Easter. In today’s continuing story of Easter in Luke two disciples trudging forlorn to Emmaus are met by the Risen Jesus. They don’t recognize who he is until they have dinner that night together and they see Jesus break the bread, bless it and give it to them.

Then they go to tell the rest of the disciples, and as they are telling them what happened, the risen Jesus appears to them all. They are filled with fright. They think he is a ghost, and no one wants to meet a ghost—even if it looks a little like Jesus.

Jesus then showed them his hands and feet and invited them to touch him—as he had done for Thomas in John’s gospel. Their response is worth pondering for a moment. One translation says: “They disbelieved for joy and wondered.” Joy, disbelief, wonderment all at once.

There are moments, maybe many moments, when our hearts feel several things at once. Like joy and sorrow at funerals. Hope and doubt together. So here: joy and disbelieving and wondering.

Emily Dickinson, no fan of the overly-certain New England brand of religion, wrote to a friend:

We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps our
Believing nimble.

The resurrection event keeps our believing nimble. And part of it is joy. Jesus came, he said to his disciples, that we may have joy and that the joy would be overflowing.

I

My sermon title, “What About the Joy?” comes from a lecture I heard recently by Davidson religion professor, Karl Plant. The lecture was in honor and memory of a mutual friend, Tony Abbott, who taught poetry and literature at Davidson.

Karl recalled a time before when he was lecturing his students about Jesus’ one verse parable in Matthew. Tony was sitting in the back of the classroom. The parable goes like this:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys the field. (Matthew 13:44).

As the lecture was ending and the students filing out, Tony yelled from the back, an impish grin on his face: “What about the joy, Karl? What about the joy?!”

Karl realized that he indeed had given scant attention to the joy part, that *in his joy*, the person sold all he had.

Joy is part of the treasure buried in a field, sometimes in our own back yard. Joy is what comes from “the kingdom within.”

II

We may, because of the madness cruelty and pain of the world around us, or because what has happened to us, distrust joy, disbelieve it, guard our hearts against it because we are afraid of another disappointment.

But poet Mary Oliver, guides us well in the poem “Don’t Hesitate”:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy

don’t hesitate. Give in to it...

Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid

of it’s plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb. ¹

Joy is the gift of God, not only to us in the happiest of moments, but also in the darkest of circumstances. People have sung joy in times of slavery, exile, oppression, of injustice and ill-fortune.

Sometimes joy is a choice we make, and as we make it the joy begins to grow. The poet Li-Young writes:

We wander the roof of hell
choosing blossoms. ²

Dorothy Thompson, the acclaimed American journalist during WWII—she was the only journalist to interview Hitler—wrote of her friend in France who maintained a serene happiness in the face of great misfortune. She said her friend displayed what she called “that most beautiful form of courage: the courage to be happy”

The poet Jack Gilbert wrote:

We must risk delight....
we must have the
stubbornness to accept our gladness
in the endless
furnace of the world. ³

What might it mean for us to give in to joy, risk delight, let ourselves feel our gladness?

III

We may ask, what things keep us from joy? Brene Brown says that we need to live with a strong back and a soft front. A strong back has to do with the courage of keeping our values, being who we are, and good boundaries. A soft front, or soft tummy, has to do with making ourselves vulnerable and taking off the armor. An armored heart steels itself against so much, including joy. Brene Brown writes that vulnerability “is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy and courage.”⁴

Some live with a strong back and an *armored front*. Some live with a weak back and front. But the key is the strong back and soft front—and a “wild heart” she adds, like the man who went and sold all he had to buy the field. It’s what the phrase in the benediction points to: “the grace to risk something big for something good”.

Sometimes because of big mistakes we have made we think we don’t deserve joy. Sometimes the blows we have suffered in life make us suspicious of joy, even cynical about it. But the Psalm says, “Weeping may tarry for the night,

but joy comes in the morning.” Easter morning is the joy that comes with the morning.

A minister was giving a children’s sermon on Easter morning. A child raised her head and asked, “What is resurrection?” That’s a pretty big word for a child. The minister paused, then answered: “Easter means”, he said, “when you think it is all over, it’s not all over.” That is joy.

Joy is not determined by conditions. Brother David Stendle-Rast says, “Joy is a happiness that does not depend on what *happens!*” It is the deep form of happiness close to what we could call a deep contentment.

IV

Joy is also communal. It is contagious. So let’s think about the joy we experience together. The French sociologist of religion in the early 20th century, Emile Durkheim, called it “collective effervescence.” If laughter is, as Anne Lamott says, “carbonated holiness”, communal joy is “collective effervescence.”⁵

Sometimes it happens in worship, during a song, or like last week when the girls read the Easter Gospel.

It’s not just a “church” thing. God is not stingy with joy. It happens at sports events, concerts. Some of us experienced it when we went to see Ruby and Naomi

in *Annie*. Parents and friends filled the auditorium to watch our children perform. Joy abounding.

So how can we increase our joy? Show up for times of joy. Like pot-luck dinners, or Grace's annual Scary Supper. Or birthday parties, or weddings. How we have missed such events the past two years.

V

Paul exclaimed, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice!" Why did he need to say it twice? Because everyday we need to be called to joy.

And he put his finger on one of the things that stifle our joy: anxiety and worry:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving (he added), make your requests known to God....

Paul was no stranger to anxiety. He was, by his confession, a nervous wreck at times in his anxiety for his churches. He was in jail when he wrote these words. He had reasons not to be joyful.

Worry can kill joy for sure. Regrets over the past and anxiety about the future can rob us of the present and rob us of joy.

Another thing, that can kill joy is sitting in the critic's chair too long. Our media-flooded world is an opinion-machine. I saw a poem entitled "Joy". It goes:

Joy

any moment

minus

our opinion of it.

God is not requiring you to have an opinion about everything. If a person comes to you brandishing an opinion, you don't have to get into a battle of opinions. It's o.k. to say, "I don't have an opinion on that."

VI

So let's return to Jesus' parable. The person unexpectedly finds the treasure and in his joy goes and sells all he has to buy the field.

What do we need to let go of, sell off, so we can have the treasure of joy? What attachments do we have that bring us misery? The Buddha said that our attachments in life bring us misery and suffering. We can get attached to things. Our things can begin to control us. We can be attached in unhealthy ways to other people. We can become attached to negative emotions, like grievance and envy.

Or to wrong thoughts and ideas. A Buddhist saying I've seen on a bumper sticker goes:

Don't believe everything you think!

I need that someday.

What's amazing is how God gives people in great difficulty and adversity joy. Joy makes a hard day good. Robert Coles in his multi-volume work *Children of Crisis*, discovered the joy in the lives of children of poverty. Joy keeps hope alive.

About a year ago I was full of worry, and had not sleep well. As Sue and I were having morning coffee on our back patio, suddenly we saw a giant blue heron fly from our left to our right along the creek. It felt like God just showed up. Everything was going to be ok. Joy.

In Wendell Berry's poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front", he writes:

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful

though you have considered all the facts....

Practice resurrection. ⁶

Resurrection means joy, too. Practice it. When it happens, what a mystic called “the merriment of heaven” comes down. When it happens, the joy of the “kingdom within” bubbles to the surface.

“What about the joy?” Tony asked Karl. Don’t forget the joy! That may be God’s message to us today!

Amen

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1. Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate”, *Devotions* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2017),61.
 2. Li-Young, from “Blossoms”, Christian Wiman, *Joy:100 Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 154.
 3. Jack Gilbert, “A Brief for the Defense”, in *Joy*, op.cit, p.36.
 4. Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness* (N.Y.: Random House,2019), 147-154.
 5. In Brown, op.cit., 130.
 6. Wendell Berry, “The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” *The Selected Poems* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998),87-8.