

Spirituality of Joy
Rev. Hannah Petrie
December 10, 2017

CALL TO WORSHIP from “The Book of Joy” as told to Douglas Abrams by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Arch-Bishop Desmond Tutu – p. 64

READING from “The Book of Joy” - pp. 48 – 49

PRAYER

May all those who lost their houses in the fires this week, and are without a home, find comfort and hope in the communities that absorb them – in the shelters, with relatives, with friends – may there be a few sparks of fellowship to brighten their worried and frightened minds. May their hearts be warm, and their bodies healthy, for the long road ahead.

May all those who lost their DACA status, and are without a country, find comfort and hope in the Americans who believe in them, who feel these undocumented people have as much right to be here as themselves. May their hearts be warm, and their bodies healthy, for the uncertain future they face.

May all those who feel lost or have lost, and are without joy, find comfort and hope in their indivisible connection to humanity, for we all have lost or felt lost – never should we feel completely alone or forgotten, for as long as we have warm hearts and healthy bodies, we are primed and ready to both give and receive joy: for the day, for the hour, for the minute, and most of all, for the moment that lies before us. AMEN.

SERMON

“Did you take pleasure in it?” This question is the traditional litmus test for a sin in the Catholic Church. The inspiration for today’s sermon topic came from a Catholic - Stephen Colbert. He was interviewed by Rolling Stone magazine in an article called “The Joy of Colbert.” On a piece of paper taped to his computer it says, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

As a half-hearted agnostic who errs toward theism myself, this statement rings true. *Joy* might be the most convincing sales pitch for God’s existence. Of course, there’s a lot of so-called ‘joy’ that gets peddled to us, especially this time of year. This is supposed to be a joyous time of year, and commerce wants you to purchase every store-bought version of joy imaginable.

But let’s face it: once you’re not a kid anymore, the Christmas season offers the kind of joy that doesn’t come in a box. I hope my thoughts today can help get you started, finding this more enduring type of joy. Especially this year, when there are literally fires burning all around us; this year, when the 800,000 dreamers, our undocumented young

adults of great promise, are told there is no room at the inn; this year, when tax reform only benefits the super-rich. I could go on, but you get the point - it's hard to lose ourselves in the holiday spirit, when so many suffer. How much merriment is really appropriate?

This year, the whole gift exchanging ritual may seem like an even more wasteful charade than usual – why should I buy stuff for people I'm not even sure they'll like, when others don't have money for the basics? The demands of gift-giving can be depleting, and you have to wonder, where is the joy in this?

There can be other reasons why joy may seem a complex emotion this time of year, and I offer myself as a case in point. I am one of those annoying people who loves the holidays – the beauty and the silliness, decorations, music, playing elf. Most of all, I love the true meaning of the season, which I hope to convey to you today. At the same time, I'm also usually navigating the winter seasonal blues, so it's a strange mixture of giddy joy and mild depression, if there can be such a thing. I have empathy for those who fight depression in general - it's hard to let the light in when you can't open the blinds.

One of the chapters in the “Book of Joy” (2016, with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Arch-Bishop Tutu) is devoted to this spiritual truth, however: “Nothing Beautiful Comes Without Some Suffering.” It's actually one of the gifts of depression – that after darkness, you appreciate the light all the more. The return of longer days *is* cause for giddy joy, especially when we can figure out how to open the blinds, even when we don't feel like it. It's also a time to wake up to what we have – to realize that opening ourselves to joy really is a choice.

There are a lot of reasons to get depressed this time of year, besides the lessening of light – with all the reminding of how happy we ought to be, we may be more reminded of what we lack, and the feelings of disappointment and resentment can be overwhelming. There can also be grief – we may have lost a job, or the chance to retire – we may have lost a loved one. We may see others close to us who are grieving similar losses.

And despite this, if we are able to affect our own attitudes and actions, which the Dalai Lama says we have the most power over, we can still open ourselves to the joy of the season. His teaching is simply to be compassionate and kind, to practice generosity – no one is instructing us that since others are suffering, so must we. What Arch-Bishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama are saying is that our authentic joy is entirely dependent on our connection and openness to others, so there's no selfish element here. We meet our basic needs of health and wholeness, yes, but then, we find that the more we do in our lives to bring joy or service to others, the more we feel joy and cared for ourselves. It's an odd paradox – the more we focus outside of ourselves, the more at home in the world we feel ourselves. The Dalai Lama says all we really need to create the conditions of authentic joy in our lives is “a healthy body and a warm heart.” And often, we are surprised that small acts can produce big results.

Recently my son joined Cub Scouts. Now that the Scouts allow gay and trans Troop leaders, I am all good with the Scouts! At the first den meeting, another mother recognized my son from a Science Day Camp, and told me that three years earlier, he had given her an unbelievable amount of peace of mind. It turns out her son was terrified to go to this camp the first day, but that when she picked him up later, he was happy because my son had taken him under his wing, and was friendly and kind to him – not just the first day, but the whole week! She was like, “you have no idea how much that meant to me.” I, of course, swelled with pride and joy, because my son had made the world less scary for his fellow.

I was also inspired in the Stephen Colbert interview by his description of his mother. Colbert says, “My desire to see things positively comes from my mom. She raised me after her husband and two of her boys died – and she did a great job, and her faith played a great role in that. She’s a loving, joyful, not-bitter woman and, boy, that’s a great example to have in your life. It makes your travails seem pretty simple in respect.” Of course, Stephen Colbert’s mother is Catholic too, so there might be something about this Jesus story to which we should pay attention

We can find some inspiration for the real meaning of Christmas in how Christianity was first practiced, which was much closer to a pagan sensibility than it is today. Long ago, Christian worship was far more frenetic and conducive to a state of pure joy for its worshippers. Author Barbara Ehrenreich is best known for her book, *Nickled and Dimed*, but she also published an interesting volume in 2006 about humanity’s irrepressible desire for ecstatic celebration, called *Dancing in the Streets, A History of Collective Joy*.

By ecstatic celebration, I’m talking about the kinds of things we think of people doing when they ‘party hardy’ – singing, dancing, dressing up, feasting, and yes, at times, drinking. The fact is that community revelry as the main event of religious worship has deep origins in human history and culture, around the globe - even in the west. Ehrenreich observes,

“Almost a thousand years after the early Church fathers issued their first condemnations of dancing in churches, we find the leaders of Catholicism still railing against ecstatic and ‘lascivious’ behavior at Christian services. Judging from the volume of condemnations from on high, the custom of dancing in churches was thoroughly entrenched in the late Middle Ages and apparently tolerated – if not actually enjoyed – even by many parish priests. Priests danced; women danced; whole congregations joined in . . . Christianity remained, to a certain extent, *a danced religion* (italics are mine).”

In a footnote, she mentions that European churches did not even have pews until sometime in the 18th century. People stood or milled around, creating a very different dynamic than we find in today’s churches, where (as you know) people are expected to spend most of their time sitting.

Indeed, there is some evidence that the figure of Jesus was modeled after the Greek God Dionysus, or Bacchus for the Romans. That’s right, Jesus was a party dude, and in the

beginning, there was far less guilt and shame associated with this form of worshipping the spirit, and celebrating life. Ehrenreich points out that both Jesus and Dionysus “shared a bohemian perspective, both were scornful of the toil and striving that take up so much human energy. Dionysus was always pulling women away from their housework to join his manic rites. Jesus advised his followers to quit worrying about where their next meal would come from and emulate the lilies of the field and the fowls of the air: ‘for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns.’ Both . . . upheld what has been called a *hedonic* vision of community, based on egalitarianism and the joyous immediacy of human experience . . . [for] to ‘lose oneself’ in ecstasy – to let go of one’s physical and temporal boundaries – is to glimpse, however briefly, the prospect of eternity.”

This would seem *not* the Christianity or Catholicism we are familiar with today. What happened to the fun? The sociological explanation makes sense, as defined by I.M. Lewis in his 1971 book, *Ecstatic Religion*. He observes, “new faiths may announce their advent with a flourish of ecstatic revelations, but once they become securely established they have little time or tolerance for enthusiasm. For the religious enthusiast, with his direct claim to divine knowledge, is always a threat to the established order.” And so this was the route of Catholicism, to be sure, but for Protestant faith as well. Even our very own Ralph Waldo Emerson was labeled heretical when he merely preached on the idea that our experience of the divine should be direct, and not ‘corpse-cold’, as he put it, as Unitarianism was. Let’s face it, Unitarians have never been known for ecstatic worship, except perhaps in the heyday of LRY, Liberal Religious Youth, in the 60’s and 70’s, and other youthful forms of worship that I recall from what came after LRY, which was YRUU, or Young Religious UUs.

Now, this is all very interesting, you might be thinking – that Christianity used to be this rather different animal – but we have come so far from this, perhaps even *evolved* from this – how useful or practical is the suggestion that we should be more joyous and ecstatic in our religious practices today? After all, it’s with our serious commitment to hard work that we are able to *afford* what is defined as a happy holiday in this day and age. Without a steady paycheck, there would be no Tanenbaum or roast beast, no eggnog, and certainly no great present unwrapping ecstasy for the children.

But I wish for our children that they become more familiar with alternative forms that great joy can take – other than the joy of realizing their parents got them just what they wanted for Christmas. For example, children love to sing, and we’d love to have a Children’s Choir in this congregation. There’s nothing material about singing, it is entirely about the moment. These days, music and singing is as close as participants of a Protestant service get to embodying joy – I’m sure members of the choir and can attest to this, and I know many of you experience joy when we sing as a congregation.

Year-round, music and dancing are my joy-machines, as well as my direct link to the divine, and for me, the most infallible sign of God’s presence. Even Kurt Vonnegut, a diehard humanist, once said that he also thought music was the best evidence for God’s existence.

What I would like to suggest this morning is that there is no reason this kind of experience of joy need be limited to religious practice. Our secular and religious lives simply don't merge as much as they did for our forbears, so it's important that we cultivate joy in all areas of our lives – in our work, our families and friendships, in civic service, and in our hobbies. The way we can do this is by becoming aware of how our own joyfulness can be a great gift to others. It does feel good to be generous this time of year – whether that's with our volunteer hours, by visiting the lonely, or helping at a food bank; or by giving our treasure to charities, or yes, even finding those perfect gifts for the people you love.

There are so many ways to give the gift of joy this time of year, and it acts like a boomerang, bringing that joy right back to you, as you give.

So what would you say is the best evidence for you, that God exists? What brings you the most joy, and is it something you can give extra attention to this time of year? If you don't think you have time, or that it's just too selfish to self-indulge, I challenge you to reconsider that line of thinking. I challenge us to listen to the Jesus of old, the Jesus who has been lost from us for centuries, the Jesus who loved worldly things like wine and meat and sex, and yet who also challenged us to let go of our worldly anxieties.

There once was a Christianity for which authentic joy was a requirement of worship – I urge you to define your joy and make it happen, empower yourselves to empower joy in others, whether this be through fellowship, food, dance, or any other form of merriment and service. The real meaning of Christmas invites you to this pleasure, to experience the intense pleasure of being a part of this world and a part of the human family.

In the Colbert household, joy was embodied through affection and singing. He says, “In my family, we could hug each other and kiss each other anytime we wanted for no reason whatsoever, and we were encouraged to sing around the house.” The interviewer asks, “Would you all sing carols on Christmas Eve?”

“Sure, we'd process through the house, and we still do it. My family is 50 people now – nieces and nephews and that sort of thing – and we process from the youngest to the oldest. The youngest puts the baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas Eve, and we sing ‘Silent Night.’ It's very traditional.”

But lest I end on too traditional a note, let me share a rock song quotation from the song you're going to get to hear in the postlude, after the Benediction today. Who else would be an expert on spiritual joy, other than Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones? He has a solo album from 2001 that has a glorious gospel anthem called ‘Joy.’ He even sings it with Bono of U2. Here's how it starts:

Oh joy, love you bring

Oh joy, you make my heart sing

When I drove across the desert,

I was in my four wheel drive,

I was looking for the Buddha,

But I saw Jesus Christ

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders

And lit a cigarette

He said jump for joy, make some noise,

Remember what I said –

There is much of what Jesus said in his ministry that is worth remembering – the teachings of Jesus call on us not only to be generous, but to be radically generous. *This* was the explicit association of joy with the person of Jesus, this was what salvation was actually about: that we find salvation in the giving of ourselves to others, and thereby the giving of ourselves over to joy, to actually *surrendering* to joy.

If we could sum up the ministry of Jesus in nutshell, it would be that enlightenment does not exist on some far away, inaccessible plane – it is not in the gilded cage in which the Dalai Lama grew up. Like the Dalai Lama refers to himself, that he is as much as us, just one person among 8 billion - for all 8 billion of us, enlightenment and joy is always right here, right now, utterly available to us as soon as we avail ourselves to it. And so may we do just that this 2017 holiday season, if only for a few magic moments. While our anxieties and sorrows are real, may we find a way to lay them down, to lay down our egos, and lay down our notions of how our lives should be but aren't. May we wake up to the joy that offers herself to us in each moment of the Eternal Now.

May we wake up, and open those blinds, to the wide and beautiful world.