

<sup>5</sup> *God's anger lasts for only a second, but God's favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may stay all night, but by morning, joy! (Psa 30:5 CEB)*

Everyone wants to be happy, don't they? We'd much rather go to a baseball game than a funeral. We'd prefer listening to a favorite song than listening to the noise of a jackhammer on a city street, right? And we'd rather feel the sun on our faces than a cold pelting rain on our heads. We'd rather be with Jesus in his days of preaching, teaching and healing, than at the foot of the cross.

Being happy is better than being sad. It doesn't take a prophet or a genius to tell us that.

In our Gospel reading this morning we are still hearing from the Farewell Discourse in John's Gospel. It is a long farewell. We will be hearing Jesus say goodbye to his disciples for a couple more weeks – the last of the Goodbye readings is on Pentecost. That makes sense. We'll be welcoming the coming of the Holy Spirit.

As I said last week, Jesus is going to great lengths to be sure that the disciples are ready for what is to come: the arrest, his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. After the resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples and gives them the gift of peace. He does so again when Thomas is in the room. He does so again in the next chapter. John really wants us to know that Jesus does not want anxiety, and hopelessness to be the order of the day after Jesus leaves this earth and the new Christian church is struggling to grow.

And now, Jesus gives his disciples the commandment that they love one another, and another gift; the gift of joy. *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11 NRS)*

Love and Joy are interdependent it seems clear. It is when we can love one another that we will find joy. And this isn't the first time that Jesus has mentioned the importance of joy in our lives. John's Gospel is full of joy. The first miracle that Jesus performs is at the joyous ceremony of a wedding. The last miracle that Jesus performs is the joyful event of the raising of Lazarus.

Of course, we can't get by in life without some times of great sadness, and there is sorrow too in the Gospel of John. The death of John the Baptist, the disagreements with the leaders of the Jewish faith, the death of Lazarus (the only time in the Gospels that Jesus weeps), and of course, Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. This all leads up to the deepest heartbreak, the crucifixion.

We would all say that we'd love to have a life of joy, and we're really thankful that Jesus gives us both peace and joy. But where is it? We search for love and happiness in all the wrong places; trying to fill a God shaped hole in ourselves with food, money, security, drugs and alcohol. When it comes down

to it, none of those things give us more than temporary happiness, and not true joy. It is God, who in Jesus called us friends, that we will find joy.

I'm reading *The Wayward Bus* by John Steinbeck at the moment. The characters presented are all searching for something that will complete them: a better job, a lasting love relationship, fame in Hollywood. But they all search for these things without regard to the others with whom they interact. No one seems to care about the others' worries, fears and emotions. As they clash with each other, thinking only about their own goals and their own lives, they hurtle towards the denouement of the novel.

Then, more than our own personal interactions with others there are the things that worry and concern us around the world; the things we can't do anything about. We're anxious about national politics and international relations. Our planet seems to experience a constant stream of tragic natural disasters, or scary diseases. Now it's the eruption on the Big Island of Hawaii where thousands have been evacuated, and houses are being destroyed. How can we maintain a life of joy in the face of all that?

I'm also reading a book for the Bishop's book group called *The Book of Joy*. It's written by the Dalai Lama, and Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams. Douglas met with the two holy men in a five day meeting in Dharamshala a couple of years ago. Their goal was to see each other and share their wisdom with us. Their topic of joy is expressed in their own friendship. They give many examples of mutual giving in their own lives. They lived that out in their time together. The Dalai Lama is not supposed to dance (as a Buddhist monk) and yet the two men danced together. The Archbishop is not supposed to give Holy Communion to anyone who is not baptized, and yet the two shared Eucharist together.

These are two of the wisest and most spiritual people who now walk the planet. What a joy it is that they don't shun each other because they are from very different religious traditions. They spoke together about joy that lasts through thick and thin, through difficulties, and pain.

And their main point is that true joy is not about self-centered pursuits that bring fleeting happiness. It is found in being more empathetic, more empowered and engaged with the world and with others outside ourselves. <sup>i</sup>

The Dalai Lama told of a time when he had travelled to a place in India where there were around one hundred thousand people who had come to attend the teachings, but suddenly he had intense pain in his abdomen. They did not know then that it was his gallbladder, but he was told that he needed to go to the hospital urgently. So, they started the two-hour drive to the hospital. On the way they passed a lot of poverty. There were children who had no shoes, and little clothing. Then under a hut he saw an old man lying on the ground. His hair was disheveled, and his clothes were dirty, and he looked sick. He seemed to have no one to take care of him. The Dalai Lama said, "All the way to the hospital, I was thinking of this man and felt his suffering, and I completely forgot about my own pain. By shifting my focus to another person which is what compassion does, my own pain was much less

intense.”<sup>ii</sup> We DO have to take care of ourselves, but in a way that doesn’t selfishly focus solely on our own suffering.

Jesus tells his disciples something similar in a portion of the farewell discourse that we will not be reading in Church. Jesus says to them;

<sup>21</sup> *When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.*

<sup>22</sup> *So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:21-22 NRS)*

Jesus tells us to love one another, but not to hate or ignore ourselves in the process. I belong to a group of women who get together in a therapy group every couple of weeks. We tell each other what is going on in our lives. And in that telling we sometimes express that we feel as if we are being selfish by doing something for ourselves, or by not doing something someone is asking of us. When we can’t figure out if we’re doing the right thing we ask each other, “Is that being selfish, or is that self care.?” We humans need help figuring out when our love is out of balance or in balance; when our search for joy is leading us in the right direction, or the wrong direction.

When the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama were about to depart the Bishop gave a blessing:

“Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created; a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, and with preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter, and joy. Amen”.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Book of Joy, The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Douglas Abrams, pg. 63.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. pg. 47.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. pg. 298.