



“Shouts (or at least whispers) of Joy”
Scripture – Psalm 126
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 17, 2017

At a recent TED Talk, a speaker (Emily Esfahani Smith) focused on happiness. She began by noting that “Scientific data on what makes people happy shows that chasing happiness can actually make people unhappy. The suicide rate has been rising around the world and it recently reached a 30 year high in America. Even though life is getting objectively better, by nearly every conceivable standard, more people feel hopeless, depressed and alone. There is an emptiness gnawing away at people and you do not have to be clinically depressed to feel it.”¹

What makes you happy? What brings you joy? Is there a difference between happiness and joy?

While most dictionaries make little distinction between the two, I find it helpful to differentiate. To me, joy is something deeper. Happiness is the delightful feeling produced by sensory pleasures, good news, and favorable circumstances. Happiness is the delight we feel eating chocolate or our favorite team winning the championship or dancing at a wedding or buying new clothes or receiving a gift or laughing at something hilarious.

Joy is something we experience at a deeper level. Joy not only produces a good feeling, but also a sense of satisfaction and well-being. Happiness is often short term while joy is longer lasting. Joy wells up within us when we work hard to accomplish a worthy goal. Joy is that warm feeling in our heart when we reconcile a broken relationship. Joy is that gratifying feeling in our soul when we are generous. Joy is that contented feeling that we have a purpose in life.

One instance in which this distinction proves helpful is when something that would never be labeled “Happy” is nevertheless joyful. As a minister, I have been a part of hundreds of funerals and memorial services. Few would be called happy occasions. But I can testify that I have spotted joy at just about every one of them – even the tragic deaths of young people. I have witnessed parents who were devastated by the death of their child, yet experienced a flicker of joy when others shared with them how caring and thoughtful their child was; or when they recall the time their child helped someone through a crisis, or how their child was known for lifting the spirits of others.

I have witnessed a shred of joy in the abyss of grief when people who have lost a loved one are overwhelmed by the number of people who showed up to express their concern. More than once I have heard someone say, “I had no idea we had so many good friends.” There was joy underneath those words.

Our joy is not dependent on our outward circumstances or our sensory experiences. We do not have to feel pleasure, neither do we have to be successful, nor do we need things to fall our way in order to be joyful. Joy has more to do with the state of our heart, mind, and soul.

Not sure I have ever confessed this from the pulpit, but I am not the greatest fan of the Book of Psalms. I know, I know: “Heretic! Wheel him off to the guillotine.”

Although it ranks as a favorite of many, I have a love/hate relationship with this collection of 150 prayers and hymns. My issue is that some of them are far too simplistic. They amount to: “I was in trouble so I cried to God and God swooped in and saved the day. Hallelujah!” When life is dark, that is what we wish would happen, but troubles seldom fade so quickly.

Today’s psalm, however, strikes a more realistic tone. The Hebrew people are being devoured by bleak times. People are frantic, tears are flowing, and like a puddle in the desert, hope is evaporating.

The writer recalls an earlier struggle that the people endured. Life descended into great depths until they were engulfed by despair. But it was not the end. Their fortunes were eventually restored. It was so unexpected that it seemed like an impossible dream. The psalmist reminds them that their ancestors’ “mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy.”

Now, in his time, the psalmist writes that the people are once again enduring arduous times, and he pleads with God, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.”

He does not minimize the misery. He does not say, “Hey folks, it’s not all that bad. Let’s look for the silver lining, shall we?”

Despair blankets the nation. But the writer of this psalm refuses to let cynicism and suffering win the day. He seeks to keep the people’s hope alive and so he writes: “May those who go out weeping...come home with shouts of joy.”

Many imagine that joy is entirely dependent on our circumstances. If we are riding the wave of success, life is rich and joyful. But the fact is, some have it all, but taste little joy. Others face countless set-backs, but still manage to maintain a joyful spirit.

The Scriptures speak of joy not only when all is well, but also when the bottom drops out and heartache is banging at the door. The light of Christ comes to people in all circumstances, but chiefly to those who walk in darkness.

Heidi Neumark was the pastor of a tiny Hispanic congregation in South Bronx when the terrorists struck on September 11th. Felipe, a member of her church, worked at the World Trade Center stocking the vending machines. For days following the terrorist attack, his wife Elba desperately searched for him. She walked from hospital to hospital showing anyone who would look, a photograph of Felipe hugging his two children. Miraculously, one day she found him alive, barely alive, with burns covering his body.

She told Pastor Neumark who then visited Felipe in the hospital. It was not a pretty scene. He had only the blackened remains of one ear showing, but the nurses believed he could hear. Elba said that their young children wanted to visit their father in the hospital, but she would not let them because of the horror of it. Most of his body was buried beneath layers of dressings.

Pastor Neumark agreed that if the children saw their father like this it would be traumatic, so she tried to think of another way to reunite them. Finally it came to her. She would make a recording of the children’s voices – a greeting for their father, something to strengthen his soul.

The son was 10 years-old and knew what to do. He spoke into the recorder: “I miss you Daddy, and I want you to come home. I love you Daddy.” But his little sister Rosalina did not understand. She wanted to talk to her father, not to a machine. So Pastor Neumark asked her to just sing her favorite song, and while the young child sang, Neumark recorded it.

Day after day the pastor went to the hospital and played the recording to Felipe, holding the recorder up to his nub of an ear. Toward the end of the second week, after skin grafts were completed and dead skin was removed from his face, head and ear, Pastor Neumark played the tape for him again. As the children's voices rang out in Felipe's room in the burn unit, she saw him, eyes still shut, trying to speak. With lips so fragile that they bled from the effort, he mouthed two words: "Thank.... you."²

Hearing his children's voices kindled a spark of defiant joy within him. Despite his wretched situation of constant pain, a feeling of wellness and gladness bubbled up within him and gave him the will to endure his suffering and to cling to life.

The Book of Joy is a New York Times bestseller based on the longstanding friendship between two spiritual giants now in their twilight years – Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. Neither has had a smooth path. Tutu had an alcoholic father and then lived under South Africa's apartheid regime for decades. The Dalai Lama was separated from his parents when he was a young child and has lived in exile for more than 50 years. These two men had every reason to live either despairing or angry lives, yet they are two of the most joyful human beings on the planet. "Their joy is not easy or superficial but one burnished by the fire of adversity, oppression, and struggle."³ They are perfect examples that life does not have to be trouble free to experience joy.

The book captures their final meeting two years ago. It would be their last time together because South Africa will not allow the Dalai Lama to enter the country and Archbishop Tutu is suffering from cancer. The long hours of travel to India took a toll on his health. Yet despite the threat to his wellbeing, Tutu was determined to make the trip because it was the perfect time for one last reunion – the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday.

Some spiritual leaders are formal and dignified, which Tutu and the Dalai Lama certainly can be. But when they are together, their love for one another frees them to play jokes on each other, to poke fun at each other, and to laugh so hard they cry.

Some spiritual leaders are full of themselves, but not these two. One of the reasons they exude both happiness and joy is because they learned long ago not to take themselves too seriously. They know how cleansing it is to laugh at yourself. Humor can be cruel if it is a weapon to belittle others. But Tutu points out that if you do not take yourself too seriously, you can "bring people onto common ground."

The path to joy not only runs through loving bonds with others, but also in becoming less focused on ourselves. When we turn the spotlight on others, when we help people in need, we experience the true joyfulness that emerges from a generous spirit.

Tutu also points out that although God intends for us to be joyful, it "does not mean that life will be easy or painless. It means that we can turn our faces to the wind and accept that this is the storm we must pass through. We cannot succeed by denying what exists. The acceptance of reality is the only place from which change can begin...The question is not how to escape the inevitable storms of life, the question is: How can we use this as something positive?"⁴ He adds, "Acceptance allows us to move into the fullness of joy. It allows us to engage with life on its own terms rather than rail against the fact that life is not as we would wish."⁵

God wants us to be happy, to relish pleasures and to experience success. But even when life conspires against us, joy can take root in our soul. It flows from accepting the reality of our situation, not taking ourselves too seriously, cultivating a compassionate and generous spirit, nurturing loving bonds with others, and developing an abundance of gratitude.

I hope you experience much happiness in life, but even more, I pray that you will go deeper, and find genuine joy.

NOTES

1. Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's More to Life than Being Happy," www.ted.com, 2017.
2. Heidi B. Neumark, "Breathing Space – A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx," (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. xvi-xvii.
3. The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, (New York: Avery an imprint of Penquin Random House, 2016), p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

The imagery of this prayer borrows from the text of "Light Dawns on a Weary World," by Mary Louise Bringle (#79 in Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal)

We rejoice in you – O God of our Salvation – for you have done great things for us! In this season of hope-filled expectation, we give thanks that you draw near to us – not just with comforting words on the lips of your prophets, or with assuring signs that startle us with your glory ... but in flesh and bone, in love we can cradle and grace we can behold. We rejoice in you, O God!

For some of us, these words of praise flow freely. For others among us, they catch in our throats. We long to be people who echo the Psalmist's jubilation, proclaiming: "Then our mouths were filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy!" But there is much in our lives, much in our world, that tempers these expressions of praise. We yearn for the day when those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. So, in hope, we bring our prayers before you:

We pray for that day when your light illumines our weary world, a day when all people will be treated with dignity and compassion. We lift before you all those who are feared as strangers, who are despised for their difference, who find no welcome among us ...

We pray for that day when your love grows in our weary world, a day when hunger is no more: when food is accessible to all, and no child's dream is squelched because of a poverty of resources or imagination. We lift before you those whose hopes are routinely trampled, whose opportunities are limited by systems that are unresponsive to either need or possibility ...

We pray for that day when hope blooms again for a world wearied by human appetites, a day when creation is renewed and stewardship is understood as a divine trust. We lift before you the plight of ecosystems stressed by climate change, and the challenges of environments exploited ...

We pray for that day, O Lord, when joy will take deep root, a day when mourning, crying, and pain will be no more and weary souls find respite. We lift before you all who suffer illness or brokenness, who are held captive to grief, who yearn for wholeness in body, mind, and spirit ...

God of surprise, God of promise — you turn the world upside down and invite us to be agents of your change. Move us away from all that tears away at your vision; move us toward a joyful and faith-filled "yes" to your perfect peace.

We lift this prayer with whispered hopes and shouts of joy, and join our voices as one to offer the words Christ taught us: **Our Father...**