

ADVENT THREE, YEAR A, DECEMBER 11, 2022

Today is the Sunday of Joy or sometimes referred to as Rejoice Sunday. The pink candle reflects this notion that today is different and it's about hopefulness and joy.

The dictionary defines joy as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." At coffee hour last week, it was asked how joy is different from happiness. Well, I came across an article that perfectly expresses the difference between joy and happiness. Here is a revised excerpt.

"Happiness depends on external factors that happens to us. Even though we may seek it, desire it, pursue it, etc., feeling happiness is not a choice we make. Joy, on the other hand, is a choice purposefully made.

Happiness doesn't bring joy, and joy isn't the byproduct of happiness. Joy is something grander than happiness. It's an attitude of the heart and spirit, often synonymous with but not limited to following Jesus and pursuing a Christian life.

True joy is a limitless, life-defining, transformative reservoir waiting to be tapped into. But it is a choice to be made. Regardless of one's faith, joy is present inside everyone as an untapped pool of potential. It is not simply a feeling that happens.

It's possible to experience joy in difficult times or feel joy in spite of grief or uncertainty. Joy doesn't need a smile in order to exist and it can share space with other emotions — sadness, fear, anger ... even unhappiness. Happiness can't.

The one thing to remember is that happiness isn't present in darkness and difficulty. However, joy undergirds our spirits and brings to life peace and contentment, even in the face of unhappiness. Most of all, joy blooms through connection. Often the connection is with other people, but it can also be with pets, creation, creativity, etc. Joy is present, in every moment whereas happiness is temporary.

When happiness is present, it feels good, and nothing feels better. But happiness is also fickle because it can be gone in an instant. True joy is constant. In its truest expression, joy transforms difficult times into blessings and turns heartache into gratitude. Joy brings meaning to life and brings life to life.

In choosing joy, there is hope. With joy, hardship offers growth and opportunity and self-esteem and self-respect are indestructible."

This is what joy truly is offering hope and transformation and it is a choice we make to carry that joy inside of us. Even the lectionary readings this morning encourage hopefulness and joy. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," promises Isaiah. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour," sings Mary, the expectant mother of Jesus.

However, when we get to the gospel this morning it doesn't seem to quite fit into our idea of joy. Joy is not evident behind the prison bars that hold John the Baptist. He is having a crisis of faith wondering if who he believed was the Messiah was the wrong person. All John could tell from his prison cell was that nothing had changed. Where was the new world the Messiah was to institute? Where was the justice, fairness and renewal that he was to bring. Had everything he preached about not true? Was Jesus the Messiah or not?

Jesus tells the disciples to tell John that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

In other words, Jesus says: go back to John and tell him your stories. Tell him what your eyes have seen and your ears have heard. Tell him that the stories, as scattered as they are, questionable as they are, will reveal about me. See, even John couldn't quite grasp who Jesus was as he was expecting a different kind of Messiah.

Debie Thomas, a priest, says, "Jesus is not a pronouncement. Not a sermon, a slogan, or a billboard. Who Jesus is, is far more elusive, mysterious, and impossible-to-pin-down than we have yet imagined. The reality of who Jesus is emerges in the lives of the plain, poor, ordinary people all around us.

Jesus comes subtly and unexpectedly in the areas we would least expect Jesus to show himself. What if "the point" of John's story is to contradict the promises of safety, prosperity, and blessing in exchange for our good behavior? Faith isn't about thanking God and Jesus when all is well. Faith is about finding God and Jesus in those moments of great discomfort and sorrow. I think God is more present in the dark abysses of the world's pain than God is in the sanitized narratives we concoct about God.

We are invited to honor doubt, despair, and silence as reasonable reactions to our brokenness as well as the worlds. We are invited to create sacred space for grief, to mourn freely, and rage against injustice and to feel deeply, because God does. To do that undergirds that joy in God which helps us through those times.

Here's an ironic fact: John the Baptist is remembered by the Church as the patron saint of spiritual joy. Sounds far fetched but perhaps its because John understood that joy is what happens when we dare to believe that Jesus is far more than we can grasp. Joy is also about knowing who you are deep within your soul so that no matter what happens, the joy you find there will sustain you.

A friend posted this cute little story that I think illustrates this point. It goes like this: Once, a donkey ascended to the shining gates of the kingdom of heaven. The gates were open. The donkey heard music more beautiful than anything he had ever imagined. Each note was a star going supernova. The song poured itself into the world.

The donkey stood transfixed. Without thinking, he opened his mouth wide and brayed. Instantly, the music stopped. There was total silence. His bray had been off-key, awful. A donkey's sound.

Slowly the gates of the kingdom of heaven began to swing shut. The donkey didn't know what to do, whether he should advance or retreat. The light was blinding. He took one trembling step forward, then another. He couldn't see a thing.

The donkey brayed again, knowing it would not be beautiful. He was right; it wasn't beautiful. It was his same old donkey bray. He did it again and again. He couldn't tell if the gates were open now or closed, or even where they were exactly. He shut his eyes and thought about the entirety of his life. He remembered eating hay, carrying firewood.

He brayed again and again. He let it rip. He kept his eyes closed and staggered forward, belting it out. Carrier of firewood, eater of hay. He took his whole life's only song and he employed it — step after step into brightness, into dazzling light.

I would say this donkey knew what joy was because deep inside of him he knew the meaning and purpose of his life despite whatever failings he had like not having a beautiful singing voice. We too, need to look at not what our failings are but what sustains us and helps us to be who we are even when we fail. Joy is found deep inside of us knowing what our life's meaning and purpose is so that we do our best for others and give generously so we can spread that joy to others. On this Sunday of joy choose to delight

in that which is good and remember that darkness does not have the last word. May the candle of joy inspire us as we work to spread God's joy and delight through this world. Amen.