

It'll Pass

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“For the present form of this world is passing away.” – 1 Corinthians 7:31b

In a little over a month, we will be in the midst of our midweek Lenten study, which, this year, will be focused on the subject of joy. That might seem, at first glance, a little off-topic for Lent, which has historically been about repentance and amendment of life and so on, but joy is fundamental to authentic Christian living, and that fact is often overlooked.

“I have said these things to you,” Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of John, “so that my joy may be in you and so that your joy may be complete” (15:11).

Jesus the Christ came to bring joy to his followers, but you'd never know that to look at us or to listen to us. Christians can be some of the gloomiest, sourest, bitterest, whining-est Eeyores on the planet.

A friend of mine said that his father sarcastically describes joys and concerns at his church as an “organ recital” – a long list of woes involving organs or other body parts that people are having trouble with. This one is having trouble with her gall bladder. This one's heart is palpitating. This one's having knee surgery. All concerns, no joys, almost always involving organs or other body parts. An organ recital.

And we're not the only ones addicted to misery. The other morning I opened the paper and the headlines on the front page were unrelenting bad news. The ongoing investigation into whether Russia meddled in the 2016 election. The military proposing a nuclear response to a cyberattack. Another Clinic doctor accused of sexual assault.

And on and on it goes. I emailed a friend of mine the other night that one of my 2018 new year's resolutions was to put myself on a media diet, because I'm beginning to feel that I've poisoned myself with the toxic soup of information, mis-information, and outright lies that are the daily fare of those of us trying to live faithfully in a world that seems doggedly bent on self-destruction.

Is there anywhere to turn, I wondered, to find a different supply of truth and a different way of looking at the world?

And I came across a book by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu called The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World, and I said to myself, That's it. That's what I need to remind the folks of Faith about – the joy of living in a world that tries so hard to take that joy from us. And if anyone would know how to live in such a world, it would be two of the world's great spiritual leaders who have faced the world's suffering head-on and yet they continue to live meaningful, passionate, joyful lives.

I was also reading the year-end issue of the journal Christian Century, in which leading theologians and ministers and artists reported on the reading that had made a lasting

impression on them in 2017, and The Book of Joy was cited by, I think, three different people as having a real impact on their lives. And so I knew I had to take this book seriously. And just the other morning, I discovered how this book has made a difference in my own life.

I inadvertently left the garage door up the other night and someone decided to try to help themselves to what was inside. They used the tree lopper to try to cut through the bike chain, but it held, and they went through the car and stole a few quarters that I use for parking meters. That appeared to be the extent of the damage and the loss.

I discovered all this when I went to get in my car to do down to the hospital to visit a neighbor. At first, I said the usual things, calling the miscreants much worse names than miscreants, but then I collected myself and remembered that I was on my way to attend a woman who'd suffered a massive stroke the day before from which she was unlikely to recover. Her distraught husband asked me if I'd visit her, and I said of course I would, and as I drove to the hospital, thinking of the anxiety and sadness awaiting me there, the theft of a few quarters and some damage to my bike chain seemed to pale by comparison.

I thought of the words of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu I'd been reading about how we can choose to react to situations, and how important it is to shift our perspective if we want to free ourselves quickly and well from adverse situations. It's so easy in our world to see ourselves as victims, and to lock ourselves up inside ourselves, with little more than bitterness and pain for companionship. And when we do that, we increase, rather than decrease, whatever harm may actually have come to us. We're actually doing ourselves more harm than good when we dwell on even legitimate grievances, let alone the imaginary grievances that we're all prone to make up.

And I thought of another point that these two great spiritual teachers make in The Book of Joy, which is that compassion lies at the core of every joyful life. Unless you have genuine compassion for the world, the best you will ever feel is pleasure; you'll never know what true joy is and how joy can become not just a fleeting emotion but a way of life.

And I thought of the probably young people who stole from me while I slept, and I thought of what their souls must be like, either not knowing the difference between right and wrong, or knowing that stealing is wrong and yet not be able to resist the temptation to steal. And as I meditated on what their souls must be like, I didn't feel anger but rather sadness at the state they must have been in the previous night. Their souls must be in much worse shape than those of the people who passed by my open garage door and didn't go in and steal. How sad, I thought, how very, very sad.

And I found myself praying for the person or persons who stole from me, that what I saw the other morning might not be the evidence of a life or lives already on a trajectory of criminal behavior.

I reflected on the theft that way, as I drove to and from the Clinic, largely in response to the words I'd been reading of two great spiritual teachers – one Christian, one Buddhist – and I found myself praying for all of you, that some of you may find similar inspiration and help for your lives if you join us for our midweek Lenten gatherings. I believe there is much to benefit you in The Book of Joy – it contains much more than I've told you about this morning – and I hope you'll read it even if you aren't able to read and discuss it with a group of us during Lent.

And one of the other teachings I was reminded of by that book is found in Paul's words to the church at Corinth that I have taken as this morning's text, "For the present form of this world is passing away."

Buddhism teaches that it is illusory to imagine that the way things are now is the way they will always be; that is most certainly not the case. We Christians believe the same thing, or at least a very similar thing, but unfortunately we've entangled that truth with another truth, which is the God's word will be the last word, which we find expressed in the vivid language of the Bible's apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic means "unveiling" or "revealing," and what's being unveiled or revealed in books like Daniel or Revelation is the end of the world. And Christians have always believed that the world, as we presently know it, is coming to an end. And common sense and the most superficial reading of history will tell us that this is indisputably true. There is no moment in history – the world of the ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world, or the world of medieval Europe – that lasted forever.

But where we've gotten ourselves into difficulty, and where we've tended to make ourselves sound a little kooky, is when we confuse our world with the world, and speak not just of the end of our world but the end of the world for everyone, everything, everywhere, and for all time. That's what we Christians usually mean when we talk about the end of the world and describe it in apocalyptic language.

But Paul, I think, comes closer to the truth when he reminds the Corinthian Christians that the world they know is coming to an end: "For the present form of this world is passing away."

Paul isn't running around like Chicken Little squawking about the sky falling. He's not urging the Corinthian Christians to stockpile weapons and supplies. He's not advising them to eat, drink, and be merry and not to give a damn.

He's telling them, rather, to practice what Buddhists call detachment – that is, an attachment to the world that recognizes that the world to which we are attached is constantly changing and will, sooner or later, not be there for us to attach ourselves to.

Or, to put it another way, Paul is reminding his hearers that the world in which we are tempted to invest so heavily – our time, our talents, our resources, our very lives – that world, whenever, whatever, and wherever it may be, is not the only world is. The present form of that world, whether we love it or hate it, is passing away. In a world of so much uncertainty – in our own lives of so much uncertainty – the one thing that we can be sure of is that it'll pass. Whatever it is, it'll pass.

No matter what you think of the present political climate, it'll pass. No matter how bellicose the rhetoric coming from North Korea is at the moment, it'll pass. No matter how dire the straits may be in which you find yourself just now, it'll pass.

The late pastor Robert Schuller entitled one of his books Tough Times Never Last – Tough People Do, and one of the best ways for you to toughen yourself up is to live joyfully. Those who live joyfully are not weak, they're strong. Remember what the Reader's Digest told us about laughter being the best medicine? Live healthfully by living joyfully.

So let me remind you of the joy that comes from living a Christ-filled life, a life in which you have accepted the joy that Jesus the Christ promises you. How can joy last, you ask, if everything changes? Does joy come and go with everything else? Isn't all in a state of flux?

Yes and no. Yes, there will be moments of difficulty and sorrow and genuine anguish. None of us gets to escape those realities, and joy in those moments will be hard to sense.

But beneath the suffering we know there is a reality that is not suffering because none of us believes that we were created to suffer. Christians don't believe that, Jews don't believe that, Buddhists don't believe that – even the most resolute atheists don't believe that we were put here, or are accidentally here, to suffer.

Whether you believe in God or not, you know that anything remotely resembling what we might call “normal” is not defined by suffering, pain, brokenness, conflict, or violence. Those realities intrude – perennially, persistently, and aggravatingly, to be sure – but they intrude on another, deeper reality that is abundant, rich, and joyous.

“I have come,” Jesus said again in the Gospel of John, “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (10:10). And abundant life is a joyous thing.

Yes, life is fleeting, but it is, at the same time, a matter of great joy. This world, with all its passions and follies, is the arena in which we humans have the opportunity to accept life as the wonderful thing that it is, and, as one form of this world passes away, to try to make the world that is coming into being better. That's the proclamation of joy in Paul's assertion to the Corinthians: “The present form of this world is passing away,” and we who follow the Christ who brings joy have the opportunity to make the world that is to come better.

And so I ask you again, as I have asked you many times before, is that not really good news?