

The Habit of Joy

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“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” – Philippians 4:4

Let's start with the oddest spot in today's scripture lessons. It comes at the end of the gospel reading from Luke: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” What good news might that have been? Here are the preceding two verses: “John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’”

If that's the good news, I'd sure hate to hear the bad news. And there's more, and it's even better – or worse, depending on your perspective. The passage opens with, “John said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?””

“Brood of vipers”? This is how he spoke to the people who responded to his call for repentance? No wonder John got on everybody's bad side. You can see, perhaps, why John had a short life and it wasn't a merry one. John's idea of the good news sure didn't look like good news to most people. Look at his answers to the people who asked him how they were supposed to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. Is John suggesting giving half of your assets to the poor? Or is he saying to the person who can afford two coats: “If you're that wealthy, spend some of that excess cash on those less well-off than you are”?

Then the agents from Rome's version of the IRS stepped up to ask for moral guidance: “Teacher, what should we do?”

And John's answer sounds reasonable enough: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” The problem with that answer, however, was that the overwhelming amount prescribed went to Rome, leaving very little for the tax collectors to live on. So they padded the accounts and imposed a surcharge – an administrative fee, if you will – that raised them a little above minimum wage. Does any of us see a problem with that?

And then the military asked John for his advice and he told them not to extort money by threats or false accusations and to be satisfied with their wages. Soldiers were part of the security forces, who relied on the intelligence community for information. They knew people's business – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and they didn't hesitate to exploit that knowledge to preserve law and order. But if someone was willing to grease a centurion's palm with a little cash for their silence – and if that person promised to stay below the radar – what harm was there in that? The soldier gets to buy his wife a new cooking pot and the citizen enjoys a comfortable lifestyle. Everybody wins.

It was a system, and people were gaming it as people game every system. You can count on it:

human nature being what it is, some people are going to take advantage of every loophole, every vulnerable party, every self-serving opportunity in any system. We've never been able to put together any kind of group activity that didn't, sooner or later, to a greater or lesser degree, fall prey to corruption. It always happens. In government. In banking. In academia. In the church – it doesn't matter. The human ego is insatiably self-directed and self-serving, and when people see other people getting ahead and getting away without getting caught, some of them will inevitably want to get in on that action.

“The heart is deceitful above all things,” the prophet Jeremiah told us (17:9), and its chief deceit is in convincing us that corruption is normal, that our business-as-usual world always includes dishonesty, exploitation, and greed. That if we're going to succeed in this world, we have to play the game and get our hands dirty.

John says no to that way of thinking. John says that there is a better way for us to live together, but it requires sacrificing the easy comforts and securities that depend on corrupt systems. The good news that John was preaching to the crowds – hard as it was to listen to at times – was that there is another way to be in this world, but it does require a radical break with what we're used to.

Those harsh images of judgment – the winnowing fork, the chaff, the unquenchable fire – they are meant to tell us that we can't dither or tinker with our systems and expect much better than what we've already got. Psychiatrists tell us that the definition of mental illness is to expect different results by doing the same thing over and over. John was telling his contemporaries that they were nuts. They were crazy to think that they were going to be that blessing to the world that was the birthright of the descendants of Abraham if they kept going along to get along. You can't play the world's game and expect God's reward. You have to play God's game for that, and God's rules are very different from the world's.

And it's our knowledge of those different rules – seen in God's ability to break into history with a winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff – that is the source of Paul's exhortation to the Christians at Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always. Attend carefully to Paul's words: rejoice in the Lord always. Paul does not say rejoice in the world always, and that's a crucial difference. Because the world is made up of those systems that are constantly being gamed. If you look at the world, there's not a whole lot in which to rejoice even occasionally, let alone always, and that's the reason so many people think Paul's words are unrealistic and Pollyannaish. Most people are fixated on the world around them rather than the world to come, of which we see glimpses all the time in this world – if we're paying attention. Here's one of those glimpses of that world to come, and it's very famous.

Maximilian Kolbe was a Franciscan friar in Poland during the Second World War. He hid more than 2,000 Jews from the German army, until his activities were discovered and he was deported to Auschwitz. After three prisoners escaped from the camp in July of 1941, the camp's Kommandant ordered that ten men be starved to death as punishment and to deter further escape attempts. One of the chosen men had a wife and children, and Kolbe volunteered to take his place. Kolbe survived for two weeks without food or water and was finally put to death by lethal injection. In 1982, Maximilian Kolbe was declared a saint of the Catholic Church.

God's winnowing fork is always separating wheat from chaff in this world, and we can see the difference. We can see the difference between the masses of people indifferent to everyone's suffering but their own, and those who relieve their suffering by attempting to alleviate the suffering of others. Barb Holtz kept at the top of our meeting agendas for the past two years a quote from Gandhi, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others,” echoing Jesus' words and way of

life. That's a truth with which God has pried open the hard shell of our misery fixation and self-absorbed world, and in that ray of divine light we see another, better world – and we discover joy.

Joy is not a happy accident. Most of us think that if we sit around long enough or do enough stuff long enough, joy will find us or we'll stumble onto it. That's not the way joy works. As we learned from the Dalai Lama in our Lenten study last spring, joy is a destination that can only be reached by itself. You can open yourself up to receiving joy, but you can't pursue it. The only way to secure joy is to stop trying to make yourself happy. The more we strive for happiness, the more we make ourselves miserable. What is the opioid crisis except the proof of how disastrous it is to try to make ourselves pain free. The more we focus on ourselves – the more we try to medicate our anxieties, drown our sorrows, or drug our insecurities – the more captive to ourselves we'll become, and there is no joy in the captivity to the self.

The path to joy is the daily renunciation of our captivity to ourselves. Not ourselves as personalities, but our selves as expressions of the ego. We cannot shed ourselves of our personalities; that's neither possible nor desirable. Our Christian faith affirms that God became a human being with a personality for other personalities, and that means that personalities are good. When Jesus said we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross if we wish to be his disciple, he was not advocating the denial of our personality; he was urging us, rather, to relinquish the false consciousness that our egos know best. Personalities are good, egos, not so much.

This past Wednesday, we celebrated one of the great personalities we had here at Faith for over forty years, and to call to our collective mind Bill Gebing's memory was indeed a celebration. In the midst of our loss, which many of us feel very keenly, we were able to rejoice precisely because Bill had let God make him him. Bill was who he was because of his personality, not in spite of it; and what distinguished Bill as the gentleman's gentleman that someone described him as being was his mastery not of his personality but rather of his ego. His personality had an ego, but his personality wasn't captive to his ego, and that's what allowed him to put others, and not himself, first. That's what allowed Bill to live out Jesus' words that we love God above everything else and we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. All of us are, by nature, little egoists – that is, preoccupied with ourselves – and the instinct for self-preservation is baked into us. Instinctually, we will seek our own welfare first – that's how we love ourselves naturally. And when, through God's grace, we love others with that kind of love, we will put them first. God takes what is given – given by God – and transforms it into something better – that's the working of grace. None of us comes into this world as a self-sacrificing Christian. That takes time, work, and the mercy of God.

And that's what the world saw, in stunning form, in the sacrifice of Maximilian Kolbe. It's what the world saw in the sacrifice of Oscar Romero. It's what the world saw in the living sacrifice of Mother Teresa. Those are the spectacular, headline-grabbing examples of people cooperating with God's grace to show the rest of us how we can escape the imprisonment of ourselves. And despite many hardships and much suffering, all of those people – those saints – lived lives of joy.

And here's the good news for us this morning. What made those Christian heroes spectacular was not the greatness of their actions, but the ordinariness of them. Yes, Fr. Kolbe and Archbishop Romero were killed for their beliefs, but their deaths were the culmination of their lives. They died as they had lived, and it was the living – the ordinary, everyday living – that shaped their lives with joy. Joy is a habit. It's the habitual decision to say yes to God rather than to remain silent and allow the world to do our speaking for us. Joy isn't waiting for us to make the right decision; joy is what allows us to make the right decision – yesterday, today, tomorrow, and the day after that. Joy is that humble sense

of gratitude for all the goodness we see around us – even in the midst of sometimes appalling violence and suffering – and joy is the willingness to cooperate with that goodness so that God may preserve and enlarge it, even in a place as horrid as Auschwitz or as squalid as the slums of Kolkata.

Some of you may have seen the photographs of Cleveland in the Plain-Dealer a few weeks ago taken by a group of six high-school students. They were part of a series called Dear Cleveland, in which the PD asks young people to write a letter to Cleveland expressing their hopes, fears, aspirations, frustrations, sorrows, and joys. One of the young women who photographed the city, fifteen-year-old Isadora Waller, offered this profound assessment of the experience of looking closely at where we live: “Cleveland is a very beautiful place. It's just about how you choose to see it.”

How you choose to see it. Seeing is a choice. Hearing is a choice. Thinking is a choice. Speaking is a choice. We choose some things and we don't choose others, and over time, those habits make us who we are. We can choose to live our lives as though we're a country-western song – my wife's left me, my dog's died, and my pick-up needs new tires – or we can choose to see in the outline of a bare branch God's amazing engineering of a tree. You don't deny the reality of either, but you decide which will be determinative for you. You can choose to live determined by the joy of the branch and not by the annoyance of the pick-up; you can choose joy.

Saints aren't made by the grand gesture or the heroic deed; saints are made by the daily habit of joy. The only thing that makes an ordinary person into a saint is their habitual affirmation of God's way of doing things rather than the world's way of doing things. And our lives are made up of small things. Small things, not great things, make saints. And in doing the small things for the right reason – for the love of God – over and over, day in and day out, year in and year out, the saint finds joy.

Joy cannot be forced, but it can be cultivated. Every farmer knows that growth cannot be forced, but a garden can be cultivated. Joy works the same way. Your everyday decisions will determine whether you will have joy in your life or not, because those decisions are the way you are cultivating the plot of your existence. And if you are cultivating your little patch because of your relationship with God – and not simply as some sort of program of self-improvement – you can rest assured of the outcome. God never fails us.

Don't count on the world for joy; count on God for joy. Cultivate those habits of daily attention to the ways God is at work in the world, and joy will follow. And celebrating that joy is what we mean by that very churchy word “rejoice.”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”