

The Gift of Joy

December 16, 2018 – Advent 3

The four candles of advent represent the gift of hope, the gift of peace, the gift of joy, and the gift of love. The emphasis is upon the reality that these are precious and powerful gifts for anyone privileged to receive and behold.

This third week of advent, we light the rose colored candle. The rose color stands apart from the deep purple of the other three, just as a person filled with joy stands apart in the common crowd. The light of joy lifts the heavy and anxious environment that is so common in the workplace, market, school campus, and at home. The little and surprising gifts of joy bring us sweet relief from a pervasive sense of sadness, discontent, melancholy, discouragement, meaninglessness.

Joy emanates from the deep place of being rooted, connected, in rhythm with the ancient streams of life. A person who has joy may be bearing the most dire and vulnerable condition or circumstance, but they have already learned to draw their water from the deep wells of the ancient and eternal places. The art of discovering and living into the real and lasting sources of joy is one of the earliest and ancient lessons of religion. Is this not the underlying message in the book of Job? The character of the devil argues that Job's joy and loyalty is derived from all his possessions and relations. So all is taken away, including Job's health, for the readers to see and discover that the source of Job's "blessedness" was not his empire, but it was his soul – his soul was connected to the divine and mysterious source of all life, and from this source he drew his water.

The phrase, "Are you happy now?" is always said sarcastically. Because I think we all know, when someone is unhappy because they are lacking something or someone, if they are unhappy, we really don't believe that once they obtain it, they will be a happy person, at least not so in the long run. Joy is a gift that is drawn up from the deep and invisible places. It is a gift, available to all, but missed by many.

I have seen persons bear crippling disease, broken relationships, job loss, serious illness of children, long roads of recovery...and yet, when in their presence I experience their joy. Dan Hibner, a man who was part of this parish for several years. He was a retired doctor who was filled with deep spiritual peace and joy. Then, tragically, while mowing his lawn, contracted the west Nile virus from a mosquito bite. He was expected to die, and when he did not die, his mobility was reduced drastically... he went through excruciating therapy and rehabilitation... to this day his life and mobility is irreversibly affected but never once did I see him lose his joy.

For most of us, we think joy will come when we achieve or get what we long for, or what we believe is so tragically missing in our life right now. But I think most of us are wrong. Joy comes to those who live deeper than the daily news or road renovations or immediate gratifications. Lasting joy comes to those who realize they are not isolated or

independent from the seven billion others who walk the planet. The warmth of the sun, the chill of winter, the pain of loss, the brokenness of failure, the blessings of love...these are not our experiences alone, but are shared with multitudes of other people. It is part of the shared experience of being alive in a body, in a community, in a world. Growing old, being young, not knowing what we will do in life, not knowing how we will make it. Whether we can survive alone, or whether we can cherish what we have, ...these are all part of sharing and cherishing life with the seven billion others upon this earth.

In a book I am reading entitled "The Book of Joy," the Dalai Lama espouses the Buddhist ideal, "If you develop a strong sense of concern for the well-being of all sentient beings and in particular all human beings, this will make you happy in the morning, even before coffee." Elsewhere the Dalai Lama expressed how he has been able to live a life filled with joy even though he has been in exile from his beloved homeland since 1959 when he was a teenager. "I am one of seven billion others upon this planet and I am not the only person who has had to flee their beloved homeland. The world is filled with refugees and migrants; my suffering is in community with millions of others. My circumstance is not unique and it has enriched my life in ways that never would have occurred if I had been allowed to remain in Tibet."

This is in quite the contrast of our own cultural perspective of individual autonomy. We seem to believe that our personal happiness and contentedness should be a concern of all the other seven billion people on this planet, instead of the other way around. But I believe the Buddha was not the only world teacher who espoused this kind of universal connectedness. Jesus of Nazareth taught his disciples to love neighbor as they themselves wished to be loved. He taught them to do unto others as they hoped others would treat them. He taught them to pray for God's kingdom of peace,, wellness, and love to come upon the earth as it existed in the imagined heavens. Jesus taught his disciples how to experience the tribulations and suffering that inevitably comes in every life in a way that maintained the assurance that ultimately the love of God will overcome the suffering in the world.

Julian of Norwich put it this way, "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of being will be well." The apostle Paul wrote, "No manner of temporal suffering and struggle will diminish the irrepressible joy of being intimate and connected to God, through Jesus, the Christ." Therefore, he said to the church in Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord, always". For Paul, like the Buddha, like the Dalai Lama, like Dan Hibner – those who carry about the gift of joy have learned to the water that Jesus talked much about – he called it living water. They have learned to draw from the wells of divine salvation and universal community.

Amen