

ADVENT 3C 2012

Understanding Joy

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

If I had been in church the third Sunday of Advent twenty years ago and heard Paul's admonition, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice," I would have been out of the building before the lector finished the reading. That is because the previous week my five-month pregnancy ended abruptly in a miscarriage. My son Leif, who would have been my daughter Christina's older brother, was gone. I was still shell-shocked from the experience; I had held my tiny, lifeless son in my arms and then handed him to the nurses, never to see him again. Rejoice? That is the last thing I felt like doing. If, however, I'd had a deeper understanding of the biblical understanding of "rejoice" or the concept of joy, Paul's words might have comforted me and guided me through my pain.

Paul Tillich says joy is not the opposite of pain; the opposite of pain is pleasure.¹ Pleasure depends upon and is influenced by circumstances—which can be favorable or unfavorable. Decisions made in Washington may or may not improve our financial situation. A relationship might or might not work out. Circumstances can dash dreams or help them come true. Our desire for pleasure influences our decisions. We consider whether or not something (or someone) is worth the pain or effort before we decide whether or not to make a commitment. Tillich also suggests that we pursue pleasure to circumvent our problems. As long as we focus on our happiness, we don't have to face our emptiness. Or so we think.

Joy is different. Joy is about appreciating the intrinsic worth of people. We experience joy when we value people for who they are and appreciate things for what they are. We do not experience joy when we focus on what we can "get" from other people and things.² The other remarkable thing about joy is the fact that joy coexists with pain and sorrow. William Loader says Paul doesn't view joy as

¹ Quotes/insights on joy are from chapter 19 of Paul Tillich's book, *The New Being*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

² Tillich, *op. cit.*

the “*absence* of pain or fear;” Paul sees joy as “the *presence* of Christ, in whom he places his hope and trust. The deep human need to belong, the joy of belonging, is met...in Christ. That unity takes [Paul] into pain and death, and...leads him over and over again on a journey from death into life, from pain to joy.”³ Paul knew what he was talking about—he wrote about joy and rejoicing from a prison cell.

Every year at this time we are saturated with Christmas music calling us to be rejoice or be joyful. Among the selection of songs for the season we are likely to hear Isaac Watts’ Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World*:

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing...*

The first line celebrates a profound and stunning mystery of faith: the Creator of the cosmos gets close and personal, takes on human flesh and comes to our neck of the solar neighborhood. God did this because God loves us and also because we need to be rescued from ourselves. Our lives are not grounded in joy. Tillich sees this lack of joy as a direct consequence of our separation from God. Recalling his view that joy is about appreciating the intrinsic worth of another rather than seeing what we can get from that person or thing, our core problem is that we treat God the same way we treat other people and things. Admit it or deny it, we do not experience joy with God because we do not appreciate God’s intrinsic worth. We confuse joy with pleasure, and focus on what we can get from God rather than on what we can give back. We struggle to live what we say in the liturgy every week in our offertory prayer: “We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: our selves, our time and our possessions, signs of your gracious love.” It doesn’t have to be that way.

The people who heard John the Baptist’s message responded by asking what they should do. Some no doubt asked that question out of fear: “What do we *have* to do?” (So that God doesn’t clobber us.) It is the familiar refrain of joyless obligation. How it must weary God to hear this tireless tune. There were others, however, who heard John’s word as a tough but life-giving invitation. They wanted to more out of life than what they were experiencing. Like lovers who ask what

³ William Loader. “First Thoughts on Epistle C Passages from the Lectionary, Advent 3.” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/CEpAdvent3.htm>. Accessed 12/10/2012.

they can do to express their love to their beloved, these were the ones who wanted to know what they could do to express their love for God. For them, joy, not pleasure, was the guiding principle behind the question, “What should we do?”

The third line of the first stanza of *Joy to the World* says, “Let every heart prepare him room.” How do we prepare? How do we make room for Christ, when our hearts, our minds and our lives are crowded by so many things? If we want our experience of Christ during Christmas to be grounded in reality, which is to say, grounded in joy, there are truthful voices to heed during Advent. John the Baptist is one of them. John tells us to bear good fruit by focusing on our relationships to others—to all people, and not just a select few. Notice the plight of the poor and do something about it. Share your stuff. Don’t cheat others, waste their time or use them for your own pleasure. Use the power you have been given to help others. Remember that nothing belongs to you and everything belongs to God. When John’s words are translated into actions, we are, as Rev. Jesse Jackson says, acting our way into a new way of thinking. Sometimes the opposite approach is the turning point: we think ourselves into new ways of acting. We can think, for example, about the way Tillich contrasts joy and pleasure and ask which one is driving our relationships with others...and with God.

Advent prepares us to receive what God has to offer—something no Christmas present, no relationship, or human promise can give: the peace beyond comprehension that walks with us in our pain, guards the doors of our hearts and minds, and keeps us centered in Christ. Our Advent task is to watch, listen and wait, even though the pressure is on to focus more of our attention on things that can deplete and exhaust. If we ponder these Advent texts, we will be in a much better position to appreciate and understand the true nature of Christmas joy.