

Rev. Kate S. Forer  
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church  
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“Approaching the World”

*Psalm 95*

*Matthew 6:25-34*

A woman was baking a cake and suddenly realized that she was out of sugar. She knew her next door neighbor well and knew that most likely her neighbor would have a cup of sugar that she could have. And so, she grabbed her empty measuring cup, took off her apron, put on her shoes, and headed next door.

But as she was walking, she began to think about all the things that had happened over the years with that neighbor. The time a visitor parked their car on her lawn and made big mud tracks, that day when the neighbor’s dog got loose and trampled her petunias, the day her neighbor made that snarky comment about what she was wearing. She was thinking all these things on her walk over to her neighbor’s house and started to get quite hot around the collar. Then she remembered the time her neighbor’s husband had borrowed her weed-wacker and broke it. And then she was thinking about the lack of sufficient apology about that and soon she was knocking on her neighbors door. And when her neighbor answered the woman looked up at her and frowned and said, “And you can keep your damn sugar!”

Now imagine if she had, on her walk over to her neighbors, been thinking about all the good things her neighbor had done over the year. Perhaps she had brought her a meal one time when she had broken her foot. Perhaps she had helped her neighbor jump start her car or given her a ride somewhere once or shared a funny story. What if she had thought to herself, I’m so glad my neighbor keeps her

lawn neat and tidy and I never have to worry about her throwing big loud parties. Would that have changed the end of the story?

Absolutely.

We create more of our reality than we care to admit.

In the lovely book, entitled *The Book of Joy*, Douglas Abrams writes about a 7-day long conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu – both men have experienced great suffering and challenge in their lives and both exude joy.

A few years ago we used this book as a framework for our women's retreat and I still find myself thinking about it. These two men have been close friends and represent two of the world great religions – Christianity and Buddhism – both religions that attempt to address the problem suffering.

Together in the book of joy, these men said, “We create most of our suffering, so it should be logical that we also have the ability to create more joy.”

And who among us doesn't crave *more joy*?

And how many of us are willing to admit we create most of our suffering?

And perhaps, as the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu suggest, it has everything to do with how *we* approach the world.

You see the difference between happiness and joy is simple. Happiness is about what happens to us, our circumstances, the good or bad outcomes. Happiness is based on what the world does to us.

Joy is about what is inside. How *we* approach the world.

Do we approach the world as it is? Or do we approach the world with our own expectations? Our own hopes and desires? Our own fears and painful baggage?

The woman who goes to her neighbor for a cup of sugar approaches her with all the frustrations she carries, with all the hurt she has felt, with her own narrative of who the neighbor is. And so when the neighbor finally opens the door, the strength of the woman's anger and hurt greets her and, we can be sure, suffering ensues.

We do this all the time. We pick and choose what to remember and what to pay attention to.

Just this week my children were complaining about camp. It's been driving my husband and I nuts. Our children are spoiled, we know it, as are most children in the United States. They have more toys than they have time to play with. They live in a lovely home. They eat nourishing food each and every day of their lives and never have to worry about going hungry. The hardest work they do is cleaning up their toys, helping us in the garden, setting the table and washing dishes. But still they complain.

This past Wednesday evening I came home excited and happy to see them and what did I get – complaints!

So Thursday morning I told them that they had an assignment, to come home from camp that day and tell me one fun thing that happened.

They had to intentionally *look* for it.

And so I heard stories of archery, swimming lessons, and games with new friends.

Years and years ago when I ran a youth group in a former church I gave my youth group kids disposable cameras and had them take pictures of where they saw God in their lives. Pictures came back of their pets, beautiful sunsets, family members, gardens and works of art. None of these things that they took pictures of were hard to find. But in approaching the world as if God is already here, as if fun is already here, as if joy is in us, we find it much more easily.

In *the Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu come up with the eight pillars of joy and we might not be surprised to learn that the first one is perspective – how we *see* things. The way we see the world is the way we experience the world.

They ask the reader to reflect on a particular problem. And let's do this together, now. Think of a particular problem you might be wrestling with. Here we are, in beautiful Rensselaerville. But now, zoom out. Here we are in Rensselaerville in the great state of New York. Zoom out again. Here we are with our problem in Rensselaerville, in the great state of New York, in the large country of the United States. Zoom out again, change your perspective – the earth – that floating orb of blue and green in space. Zoom out, change your perspective – a speck in an expanse of darkness. How big does your problem seem now?

The opening verses of our psalm ask us to take on a certain perspective, to approach the world a certain way – and it is a way of joy and praise. Our Gospel reading from Matthew asks us to consider the lilies of the field.

Listen again to these first verses from this psalm but translated by Eugene Peterson in the Message

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;

let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

<sup>2</sup> raise the roof for the Rock who saved us!

Let's march into his presence singing praises,

lifting the rafters with our hymns!

<sup>3-5</sup> And why? Because GOD is the best,

High King over all the gods.

In one hand he holds deep caves and caverns,

in the other hand grasps the high mountains.

He made Ocean—he owns it!

His hands sculpted Earth!

<sup>6-7</sup> So come, let us worship: bow before him,

on your knees before GOD, who made us!

Oh yes, he's our God,

and we're the people he pastures, the flock he feeds.

By the end of the psalm, we are reminded to keep our hearts open, we reminded of past instances when we have failed to see with gratitude all that God has provided, we are reminded of the faults of our ancestors, and we reminded that in order rest in God, to trust in God, we need to open our eyes.

So let me ask you -- When is the last time you felt joy? Not because of something that happened to you or because things went your way, but because of what you know deep in your soul to be true regardless of circumstances or fleeting moments? Because of the perspective *you* bring to the world?

I'd like you to close your eyes for a moment.

Just sit and breathe for a moment.

And hear now these three deep truths:

First, you are loved. By the God who created the deep caves and caverns, the God who created the high mountains, the God who created the oceans. That divine Creator also created you and loves you.

Second, you are good and sacred without even having to do anything. That's the grace God offers.

And lastly, you are safe and held in the very presence of God's own self.

Now, open your eyes, and, knowing these things to be true, approach the world.

Amen.