

What Does Jesus Know about Joy?

**Sermon Given by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 28, 2019**

Scripture texts: Jeremiah 31: 10-14
Luke 15: 25-32

Again this year, the summer preaching theme at this church bears the graceful fingerprints of the Session's careful and earnest reading of what it feels like to be alive in this world in these times and in this faith of ours. This is surely a time for some sort of spiritual GPS to point out the sequence of turns that will take us to the kind of special, deep satisfaction we call "joy"—or, at least, to get us thinking about some of the signs we might be looking for on the way.

Every year I pluck the theme phrase from the church's early spring announcement, put it in the pocket of my mind and then, over the course of a few weeks, turn it over and over like a pebble from the beach, trying to feel the facets and imagine the possibilities—and listening, most of all, for a text from scripture that might speak to the questions that I've started to feel lurking in the theme. As I thought about it, I knew I could mine the Hebrew scriptures for all kinds of evocations of joy: some reassuring ("Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning"—Psalm 30:5); some triumphant ("They shall come and sing aloud upon the height of Zion, and shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord"—Jeremiah 31:10); some just plain rowdy ("how good and how lovely it is / to live together in unity / like precious oil running down the beard of Aaron"—Psalm 133:1-2). And then, thinking about the New Testament, I knew that there'd be a lot of help available from Paul. As Barbara Wheeler mentioned last Sunday, Paul is a very deep and sober thinker about joy, and I imagine that you can look forward to at least a few great sermons this summer on Paul—really!—maybe especially from his letter to the Philippians, where he writes, *from prison*, in an attitude that one commentator calls "a joy wider than the world."

But then I started trying to think of a moment in the gospels that could be mined for insight about finding joy—and the path took a sudden turn and disappeared into the shadows of a very deep thicket. I couldn't think of a single moment when the gospels capture Jesus in any situation that could be called unabashedly joyful. We never see him throw back his head and laugh from his gut; he seldom if ever expresses overt pleasure in an experience or sensation; the course of his life as we see it never seems to give him a chance to pause and be dazzled or elated or enthralled. The way the gospels are constructed, Jesus certainly isn't much of a role model for joy so it's not immediately clear how following in his footsteps is going to help in finding joy.

But ... we *are* following his footsteps, and ... I have this deep intuition that something about this journey of following IS connected to the search for something we would call joy. But what is the connection??? What does Jesus know about joy???

The gospel landscape is full of stories of things that happen: situations with Jesus at the epicenter—that, you would think, would be occasions of profound joy. Things happen to people, because of Jesus, that would give them cause for the deepest joy: healings, wonders, discoveries. Let's think about one of each of

those: three very familiar stories with very simple narratives (all from the gospel of Luke, as it happens, though I think this would work with stories from any of the other gospels as well).

First, a healing: The woman with the continual hemorrhage (Luke 8:43-48), who has suffered for 12 years but somehow knows, in her core—or, at least, hopes with every ounce of her being—that she doesn't even need to explain her distress to Jesus; she knows already that he is as full of healing as she is of hope, and all she has to do is connect to him, touch him, make contact with him. That, as you remember, is exactly what happens—in the middle of a pressing crowd—and when Jesus turns and realizes what has happened, he says to her, “Your faith has made you well.” And then, at precisely that moment when we might expect to catch a glimpse of something like genuine, full-strength joy—*the story breaks off*.

Then let's look at a wonder: the quite inexplicable feeding of a very large crowd that had gathered in a remote and deserted place to listen to Jesus' teaching (Luke 12:9-17). As dusk begins to fall, the disciples are feeling responsible for the care of the crowd, and they urge Jesus to dismiss everybody to the surrounding villages to get food but Jesus says, remarkably, no, you give them something to eat. They scrounge among themselves and come up with nothing more than five loaves and two fish for a vast crowd, which, as I'm sure you remember because the church has never forgotten, turns out to be enough to feed everyone, though who knows how, and with twelve baskets of food left over. But at precisely the moment when we might expect joy to break out, at least among the relieved disciples if not among the astonished crowd—again, *the story breaks off*.

And let's look at a discovery: the little parable Jesus tells about the shepherd with 100 sheep, one of which becomes lost, causing the shepherd to leave the other 99 unattended in the wilderness while he searches the ravines and thickets until, finally, he finds the stray (Luke 15:1-7). “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” In this instance we do get to see the celebration but there's an important clue here: Notice that the way that joy breaks the narrative surface is when the shepherd first asks his friends and neighbors to understand the distress he was in while the sheep was missing.

Why is it, I wonder, that the narrative declines to linger in any of these moments long enough for something like joy to burst out? Why is the gospel so reluctant to show us the reward, to let us hear the laughter, to see the effect of the breathtaking change or the tears that mark the realization of highest hopes and deepest longings?

We can imagine that the time when these stories of Jesus's actions and his words were stitched together into these remarkably resilient, though always mysterious, documents must have been a dour time. The shadows that fall across the pages they compiled are dark and intense and fearful, full of ominous rumblings of persecution, privation, oppression, corruption. On the face of it, it's a story that doesn't end well: Its hero is executed in shame on a trumped-up charge, with almost all of his supporters fleeing for their lives. Only a small band of courageous women linger to keep him company while he dies in agony; then, after a hasty burial to accommodate the religious practice of their culture, they return to the tomb to find that things are not what they seemed, have not ended as they had thought, maybe had not ended at all, maybe had only begun but again, the story breaks off well short of the outpouring of joy that one might expect such a reversal would provoke. In the gospel of Mark, the last word is that the women fled more or less in terror

from the emptiness of the tomb—and the story breaks off at that point, literally, textually, with a dangling preposition hanging in midair. In the gospel of Luke, several broken-hearted disciples are trudging out of Jerusalem at nightfall, probably fleeing for their lives too, when they meet a stranger on the road who helps them to look at the story of the death they've just witnessed and see it differently; they're intrigued, and invite the stranger to share the evening meal with them when they reach the inn at Emmaus—and when he takes the bread and blesses and breaks it ... well, you recognize the story. So did they. But at that moment he vanishes, and the story breaks off just short of the joy.

The time that gathered these stories for us, and left its fingerprints all over them, was a dire and dangerous time. So is our time. Though of course the circumstances are different, it would seem that they have the search for a path to joy in common. We know what it feels like to be scouring a desolate landscape for any sign or promise of an antidote, a counterpoint, a "fix".

But what it seems that the gospel compilers understood—which, I venture to say, we for the most part do *not* understand—is that joy is not really a destination. It's the light by which you see where you're going. Christianity is not a system for making people happy. Christianity is a way of making sure that people are not left alone.

Look at how the mainspring of every one of these stories, and so many others we could have chosen, is wound by the unwavering journey of Jesus to enter into the longing of another person. It may be that joy is what's found but what's being looked for is a way in to where the ache is.

Let's think about one more story: a moment of reconciliation. (Here's the reading from the gospel that you've been patient about waiting for. It's actually just the very end of a story—the place where it breaks off—but I think you'll recognize it: Luke 15:25-32:)

"Now [the father's] elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then the older son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But the elder son answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

You remember what had happened: the young, rash, spendthrift son, the "prodigal," demands an early payout of his inheritance from his father but, a few months later, he comes crawling back to his father's house having been beaten up and spit out by the high life that he thought would embrace him. Though he worries that his father will only bury him in a heap of scornful I-told-you-so's, the father is beside himself: dazzled, elated, enthralled, and the party begins: yes, for once, something like real joy in the gospel pages, complete with belly-laughs in the background and tears of disbelieving wonder running down cheeks. But, it turns out, that's not the culmination of the story, not the punch line. There's one more scene, a coda: the older brother, standing off to the side in bitterness and jealousy that his rash, stupid younger brother is the focal point of so

much celebration. The father speaks to the older son, without returning his anger or bitterness, as far as we can tell, but without mincing words either: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” And at *that* moment, *the story breaks off*—with the father’s implicit question hanging in the air: Can you see this moment differently? The young, spendthrift son may have found his way back home into his father’s longing, but the story is not over until the *father* has then made his way to the threshold of the older son’s ache, and named the longing that has so distorted him as to turn his own brother into a rival and adversary. The story is not over until the father has knocked, belatedly, on the triple-bolted door of his older son’s need. And then – with the sound of the knock—*the story breaks off*.

The way of Jesus is not a system for making you happy. It’s a way of making sure that no one is left alone.

I have my own little coda to add about this project of finding joy. One night, some years ago, I got a call from a man I knew fairly well: Hodge, a retired professor at Williams whose wife Nancy had suffered a massive stroke a few days before. He was calling to let me know that the doctors had alerted him that his wife’s end was nearing. I made my way to the hospital, found Hodge sitting with Nancy in a darkened room, and sat down beside him. There was a deep sadness in that room, of course but there were other things, too, and over the course of the next 6 or 7 hours Hodge told me stories and remembered moments, and I think we probably talked politics a little, and maybe even did a little dishing of the college gossip, all the while taking turns holding Nancy’s hand. At one point during the smallest hours of the night, a long and very peaceful silence fell over us and then, after a while, Hodge said, “I think what we’re trying to do is bring Nancy in for a soft landing.” A soft landing... Something about those words... In the silence that returned, the moment after he said them, even with all the sadness in the room, in fact, *precisely with* the sadness in the room, and all the stories and memories, and maybe even all the politics and college gossip too, with all of that, in that moment, it flashed in my mind to think this: There is no place else in the world that I would want to be right now other than here with Hodge bringing his Nancy in for a soft landing.

Is that joy? I don’t know, I still get lost, sometimes, when I go looking for it. But I think what Jesus knows about how to get there is just this: Look for the need, knock on its door, climb in and sit down next to it, and then—see what you can see.

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