

Finding Joy

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stewart Pattison
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
June 30, 2019

Isaiah 55: 1-15

Matthew 13: 1-8

The theme for this summer's sermon series emerged from a conversation of the Session. It began with a poem by Jack Gilbert entitled, "A Brief for the Defense".

*Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, there are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that is what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We stand at the prow of a small ship
anchored late at night in a small port
looking over the sleeping: the waterfront
is three shuttered cafes and one naked light burning.
To the sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.*

(Christian Wiman, ed. Joy: 100 Poems, Yale University Press, 2017, p.36)

The theme, “Finding Joy”, emerges from the fact that many of us are all too aware of the deep suffering of the world. It is pushed upon us day in and day out. As Gilbert, with brutal compassion observes, “If babies are not starving somewhere, they are starving somewhere else.” The heart-shredding photograph in yesterday’s Times Union of a father and young daughter face down in the Rio Grande River near Matamoros, Mexico is but the latest image of worldwide suffering and tragedy. It is compounded by the fact of our complicity in this horror.

Gilbert’s poem functions for me as an elaboration and gentle critique of Frederick Beuchner’s famous statement that “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We are experts in worldwide tragedy and ecological destruction. We get the part about the world’s deep hunger. But what about the first part? What about our deep gladness? What about Gilbert’s call to us to “enjoy our lives *because that is what God wants* (my emphasis)”.

There are amazing people in the world who sustain a lifetime commitment to fighting violence, injustice and environmental destruction. In my experience they have a deep gladness, which is readily drawn into the world’s deep hunger and anguish. It is a true calling and gift of God. I am not one of them. My history with social justice issues is a tale of anger, bitterness and burnout. I become overwhelmed and then seek to withdraw into a safe quiet space. Yet there is no running away. God does not give me or anyone a pass on caring for creation and all that dwells therein.

The path out of despair lies not in putting distance between our lives and the suffering of the world—which includes, of course, our own suffering—but in seeking to find and cultivate our deep gladness, our joy.

What is this deep gladness, this joy?

The passage we heard from Isaiah culminates the final address to the exiles in Babylon. Cyrus, the king, is about to allow the exiles from Judah to return to Jerusalem. Throughout the time in Babylon the people have created a fantasy picture of Jerusalem. They remember its strong walls bustling streets and above all the gleaming Temple of Solomon. They have told their children about it. O to return to Zion both the political capital and their spiritual home! Yet God knows otherwise. God knows that when they return they will find Jerusalem to be a heap of rubble. How will they respond to the terrible disillusionment? What will sustain them in the years it will take to rebuild the city and the temple? Zeal and determination will not be enough. Indeed the prophets Haggai and Zechariah confirm the fact that after a brief period of activity the people became discouraged and began to build affluent homes for themselves.

In his concluding words to the exiles, Isaiah offers God’s generous invitation before they return to Jerusalem. They offer a possible starting point in seeking and finding our joy—our deep gladness. To everyone who will listen Isaiah proclaims, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to

the waters! There is no cost for my food and drink! Why do you spend your money on that which cannot feed your soul and satisfy your deepest desires?”

I propose to you that our journey toward finding joy begins with the realization that we do not have to work for it. It has already been given. We cannot make ourselves truly happy by trying hard. We begin the journey by accepting the fact that God has already provided the reality of deep gladness. It is the gift that only a parent can give to a child, that of unconditional love. While human parents routinely fall short of communicating this unconditional love from generation to generation, the scripture reminds us that there is a heavenly parent who simply wants us to be happy and rejoice in what the apostle Paul calls “the freedom of the children of God.”

It is this utter freedom to receive without strings the gift of life that is the source of the deep gladness. We are free because we know that we did not create ourselves. There is no deeper joy than to be alive in the world and to delight in the joy of a loving Creator. Such a love, being the very essence of the Source of Life cannot *but joyfully extend God’s generosity to give to hope and healing to others*. Yet the question becomes, if this is so, why is there so much greed, violence, prejudice and indifference? Why do we choose to work for that which can never satisfy?

I propose that Jesus’ parable of the sower provides a helpful context. The sower casts the seed of the Kingdom of God everywhere. Just as the farmer casts the seed everywhere so God in Jesus has cast the seed of his joy so broadly that there is no dimension of our lives that it does not land. Far from being accidental that this seed lands on hard, rocky and weed-choked soil, it is God’s intention that we understand that *no part of our lives is excluded from his deep gladness*.

This is good news. The place that God is called to be is where *God’s deep gladness* meets *our deep hunger*. As Christians we believe that God sent Jesus into the world to put a face on that deep gladness. It is God’s desire that as we find that joy we become Jesus’ face to the people around us. Amen.