

**“Joy, A Firm and Quiet Strength”**  
**Sermon delivered by Sister Joan Scanlon, O.P.**  
**Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, September 1, 2019**

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this unique series. I am honored to be invited and happy to reconnect with my family. I mourn the loss of Connie (Rauch), who first introduced me to this community. I believe in the communion of saints and believe that her spirit continues to inspire and challenge us.

My concern today is that you are all “joyed” out. Being the last in the series, I hope I can offer some reflections that will be of benefit as we search for hope and consolation in these troubled times. The only time we have is now; This is our moment. Our world is in great need of spiritual gifts and it is our time and our call as Christians to respond to the spiritual needs in this country. We can pray with the psalmist: “In every age O God you have been our refuge”.

When I first heard the theme “Finding Joy”, I immediately recalled a poem by John L’Heureux entitled “Quick as Dandelions”. This poem offered me hope in the 60s when I was much younger and like all of us in our youth, trying to find my way in life. The line which I remembered so spontaneously is: “*Joy is like that coming quick as dandelions, shuddering a little in the spring*”. This image was a starting point for my reflection on joy as a firm and quiet strength.

We usually think of joy as exuberant, energetic, fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, laughter. We speak of joyous occasions and the joyful reunion of old friends and many Hallmark images can fill our imaginations.

Today I would reflect on joy as a characteristic of holiness or maturing in the spiritual life, joy as a gift or grace and finally the overflowing of joy in action.

During the summer, I intentionally read the *Book of Joy* by the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, the *Road to Character* by David Brooks, *Barking to the Choir*, *The Power of Radical Kinship* by Gregory Boyle, *Guadete et Exsultate* by Pope Francis. Unintentionally I have found many references to joy in novels and in hymns. Joy seemed to be seeking me out and leading me to make the connection between Joy and Holiness.

Let me begin with Holiness. Not a topic we will be hearing on “Morning Joe” or “The View” or “Late Night with Steven Colbert”...at least not directly.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew:

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*  
Matthew 6:19-21

Holiness is the lifelong pursuit of finding that inner treasure...where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. Holiness is a call, a lifelong pursuit, always a work in progress. It has seasons of darkness and light, of barrenness and fruitfulness. And Joy is a fruit of pursuing that inner treasure, that relationship with God which gives us purpose and helps us find meaning.

Theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way: The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. Finding that place is a lifelong journey and all of us undertake that journey in our own way. Buechner speaks of deep gladness; we might say deep joy.

Both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures give us examples of the call to Holiness. The call of the prophet Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I dedicated you.* The beautiful prayer of Psalm 139, *O Lord, you have probed me and you know me.* All of us are called to Holiness each in his or her own way.

There are many models of human development which outline stages of growth, psychological growth, moral growth, emotional growth. I think they can be summarized in the answers to 4 questions.

Who am I?

Whose am I?

What shall I do?

What does it mean?

Growth in the spiritual life parallels these questions.

Growth in the spiritual life evolves in three movements, which may or may not go in this order. There is usually some form of call, which leads to a covenant or connection to others and then a commitment to do something, to be someone as we grow in our relationship with God and others.

When Pope Francis visited the US and addressed the Congress, he raised up four Americans who captured a particular facet of American culture and spirituality. Most people knew Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. but many did not know Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, or Dorothy Day, the social activist. Both Merton and Day are admired for their holiness. For Merton, a Trappist monk and prolific writer, for Dorothy Day, a social activist and consistent anti-war protestor, but neither led perfect lives, both struggled and failed but were faithful to their call and their commitment to others, pursuing holiness in their own unique ways. I raise these examples because holiness is often portrayed in sentimental, pietistic images, not in the real human struggle of trying to live a life of integrity.

I invite you to think of your own life and your efforts to find the treasure of your heart. To follow your call. Finding that treasure; that place where your heart is. That place of deep joy.

In their book about joy, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu described a “virtuous cycle.”

They write, “the more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience, and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others.” For the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, being joyful is not just about having more fun. It is about being more empathic, more empowered and having a more spiritual state of mind that is totally engaged with the world. From my perspective this is the call to Holiness and it is characterized by Joy.

In his book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks describes a moral ecology for our culture and uses life stories to give examples of persons of character. He writes, “we don’t live for happiness, we live for holiness. ...All human beings seek to live lives not just of pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness, and virtue.” In his book, Brooks shares many life stories of persons who walked the road to character.

A question for reflection...What is your definition of holiness? Do you know persons whose lives exemplify your definition of holiness? What wisdom do they have to offer you? What gifts do they offer to the world?

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. Store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*

Joy is characteristic of holiness and it is also grace or gift. My second point for reflection is Joy as a grace or gift.

The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal and to sanctify. That’s a theological definition that is a little sterile. In the early days of my formation as a Dominican sister, I was mentored by a beautiful woman, actually a New Yorker, who introduced me and my companions to the concept of grace of the present moment: The understanding that God’s presence is always available to us in the present moment.

*In every age, O God, you have been our refuge*

*In every minute, O God, you are present for us*

The gift of your grace is enough...if I can learn to access it.

I like to think of joy as a grace or a gift, an infusion of joy or clarity or insight or reassurance that comes when we are digging around in the field of our inner world looking for meaning and purpose. Sometimes it is just a cameo appearance, sometimes it is a whole act.

Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has worked for many years with gang members in LA. He founded Homeboy Industries to give gang members an opportunity to work and find their way out of the

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, September 1, 2019

violence of the gang world. In his books *Tattoos on the Heart* and *Barking to the Choir*, he tells one story after another about his homeboys and homegirls and their amazing journeys.

He writes: *We keep moving, walking forward on the Good Journey, finding moments of joy along the way until those moments join together and usher in a life of happiness. So, what we focus on and hope for, in the meantime, is a commitment to abide fully in our complete humanity. We bring as much compassion and wakefulness to our own lived experience and know that nothing human is ever abhorrent to God.* Another definition of Holiness.

Joy is like that, coming quick as dandelions, shuddering a little in the spring. Father Greg knows how to mine those precious moments when the grace of joy breaks into lives of conflict, dysfunction, and violence. He is open to the grace of the present moment. We all have these moments if we have the eyes and the heart to see them and to cherish them.

In my own work as a campus minister to the iGen Generation, I try to engage the students in an old-fashioned practice of conversation rather than texting, trying to draw them into some religious practices and service project. I sometimes feel like Sisyphus pushing the same rock up the hill. But sometimes I do connect and grace and joy abound if only for a brief moment. And for a brief moment I want to buy the whole field for joy.

Joy as a grace. A question for reflection: **Have you experienced graced moments of joy? When and how do they come?**

And, finally, Joy is a call to action. The natural outgrowth of pursuing holiness, of being open to receive grace and the gift of Joy is putting Joy in action.

I will return to the question I asked in the beginning of my reflection. How are you called to respond to the spiritual needs of our times? What spiritual gifts do you have to give? How do you give them?

This is a very daunting question and one I have been pursuing for many years. Do we just pray and do good works? Or do we speak out again injustice and try to transform systems which beget misery and oppression? What shall I do?

Thomas Merton writes that you cannot have social order without saints, mystics and prophets. The poet Mary Oliver writes: *Instructions for Living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.*

I turn to the Gospel of Matthew and consider yet again the beatitudes, the BE Attitudes...Attitudes of Being.

A roadmap for Holiness. A way to live the call to Holiness is to be open to the grace of the present moment and to turn that deep joy into action for the good of others.

*Today is holy, do not be saddened. Then all the people began to eat and drink, to distribute portions, and to celebrate with great joy (Nehemiah 8: 11-12)*

I wish you great joy.

#### Reading List

“The Book of Joy, Lasting Happiness in a Changing World”

By His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu

With Douglas Abrams

Avery an imprint of Penguin Random House, New York 2016

“The Road to Character”

By David Brooks

Random House, New York 2015

“Barking to the Choir”

The Power of Radical Kinship

By Gregory Boyle

Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2017

“Tattoos on the Heart”

By Gregory Boyle

Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2011

“Gaudete et Exsultate, Rejoice and Be Glad: On the Call to Holiness in the Contemporary World”

By Pope Francis, 2018