

Joy: Not What You Think

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The beating heart of the universe is holy joy. —Martin Buber

Ancient Witness: John 15:9-11

This Advent, we're using the popular themes each week: Hope, Joy, Peace and Love. And today the theme is Joy, and it's a great excuse for me to talk about something that I'm kind of obsessed with: this whole notion of happiness and how it relates to the spiritual quest.

I think it's safe to say we all want to be happy. Nobody wants to be unhappy. And yet it can be so difficult to find. We spend our entire lives trying to be happy and content. We make our lives more comfortable and secure, finding jobs, earning money, acquiring things. We provide things for others—our loved ones, family members and sometimes strangers, even. We work. We achieve. We have relationships, get married, find life partners, fall in love, raise children. We seek companionship. We travel. We find hobbies. We take vacations. We find things to do—sports, music, entertainment. We pursue happiness in so many ways, and yet it can be so difficult to find. I submit this is probably the major spiritual quest. The Sufi mystic once said that the only relevant spiritual question is, “Why aren't you dancing for joy at this very instant?”

Jesus taught his followers to be happy. He talked about living in a state free of anxiety and fear. He talked about being full of joy and peace. He referred to this as the kingdom of God, the sacred realm. It is a place that is within us all, a place that we all can enter. When we are in this place, we are released from anger and have freedom to love others and courage to act with integrity. In John's portrait of Jesus, he says,

I have said these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

That's the whole point—everything that he said—so we might have joy. Furthermore, Jesus said that we all already have what we need for happiness, and it does not come through striving and toil, achievement and accomplishment. In fact, those ideas of happiness actually lead us astray and distract us from this kind of joy and happiness he's talking about.

Jesus said to look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. They don't worry. They aren't filled with anxiety. They are happy. They are not held down by the wrong ideas.

I find that just about every religious tradition deals with problem in a similar way. The Buddhist version of the formula goes something like this:

1. The world is full of unhappiness or suffering.
2. The root of unhappiness is attachment.
3. The uprooting of unhappiness is dropping of attachments.

What, then, in this Advent and Christmas season, are attachments and how do we drop them? Well, attachments are desires, those things that we want. Now here's where I think that Buddhism has gotten a bad rap. It's not about living without any desire at all, like you're kind of floating on the

clouds somewhere. We're not talking about dropping all wants and desires. Rather, attachments are certain kinds of desires that have run amuck. *Attachments are those desires upon which our happiness depends.* Attachments are those *things to which we hook our happiness.* They are those *things we think we need in order to be happy,* which for all of us are more than we can count.

Please hear me. Desire is not always selfish or evil or wrong. We desire many fine things—companionship, sexual intimacy, tenderness, relationships, things required for life. But the problem happens when we hook our happiness to our desires—even our finest ones, things like justice and compassion. Because we already have what we need for happiness.

This is a very counter-cultural thing to say. Because our culture says that love *is* attachment. Listen to the songs that say “without you I can't be happy.” That's not love; that's attachment. That's the desire to possess. “I need to have you,” goes the song.

The spiritual reality is that we already have what we need for our happiness. We were born with it and will die with it. And when we are in touch with it, when we hook our happiness to this one thing, then we can truly love and be truly happy.

And what is this one thing we have for happiness? Jesus described it as the kingdom of God we are living in right now. It is the miraculous present moment in which we can feel the sacred pulse of life. It's not yesterday or tomorrow or even in the next minute. It's now.

Of course, this is so hard to do, to live mindfully like this. Because we've been taught to be attached. We've been trained to want the thrill and chills, not happiness. And after each emotional high, each attainment, follows a dip, a depression, until the next one.

I think that this is what Jesus meant. You still enjoy the material world; you still enjoy the relationships you have with your parents, spouse, children and family; you still treasure them. You just don't make your happiness depend on it. As Tilopa famously said, the problem isn't enjoyment; the problem is attachment. As the poet, William Blake, wrote:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy.*

When we bind ourselves or cling and attach to an enjoyment, we destroy “the winged life.” So, I'm not talking about happiness as a feeling or emotion. Psychology says there are four basic human emotions: mad, sad, glad and afraid. The happiness of spiritual awareness is not one of those emotional states that float around the surface of our consciousness. Rather, happiness that the great spiritual teachers talk about is a *state of being, a deep undercurrent of contentment and well-being that flows no matter what might be happening on the surface,* no matter what emotions we may be feeling at a particular time.

Listen to what the apostle Paul wrote:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty... I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry...
(Phil. 4:11-12)

Paul said he learned the secret of happiness and contentment, and it doesn't depend on what is happening on the surface of our lives. It has nothing to do with smiling or crying.

So much of what we call happiness is not happiness. It has to do with circumstances. It has to do with what we get. True happiness is self-sufficient. It is indestructible and cannot be taken away, said Jesus. It can exist anywhere, anytime. It doesn't override pain, anguish, and suffering, but it can visit in the midst of these things. It *coexists* with them. Often we equate happiness with comfort, with not being upset, with not being in pain or in a struggle. No wonder it eludes us!

It's a very shallow, superficial perspective to me. It's something that rubs me the wrong way. It's like when I go to one of those "praise churches" when everyone has to clap and be happy—that's fine. But to me there's a kind of superficiality to that kind of equation. I think it's a misunderstanding.

I heard Anthony de Mello talk about what it means to be truly alive and happy, and he put it like this once:

There can be life in the midst of suffering and no life in the midst of comfort.

Can we see this? Can we see how in the midst of comfort, success, wealth and health there can be life without life, an emptiness, a sense that something is missing? I've certainly experienced this.

But here's the unbelievable part: You can be full of life and happiness in the midst of failure, pain, sickness and depravation. "Don't tell me this!" you might say. "Don't tell me I can find happiness in these circumstances; tell me how to change the circumstances!" And so this is the thing: that we already have what we need for happiness, and it's very difficult to believe.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English mystic, speaks about the secret of joy: "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything and everything in God." In a nutshell, this is it. Seeing God in everything brings an endless Joy and her twin sister, Gratitude. Philosopher, Ken Wilber talks about his enlightenment:

Spirit, and enlightenment, has to be something that you are fully aware of right now. Something you are already looking at right now. As I was receiving these teachings, I thought of the old puzzles in the Sunday supplement section of the newspaper, where there is a landscape and the caption says, "The faces of twenty famous people are hidden in this landscape. Can you spot them?" The faces were maybe Walter Cronkite, John Kennedy, that kind of thing. The point is that you are looking right at the faces. You don't need to see anything more in order to be looking at the faces. They are completely entering your visual field already, you just don't recognize them. If you still can't find them, then somebody comes along and simply points them out.

It's the same way with Spirit or enlightenment, I thought. We are all already looking directly at Spirit, we just don't recognize it. We have all the necessary cognition, but not the recognition.

And so our awareness and joy are not dependent upon the Spirit doing anything more. The Spirit is already doing enough for us to see and to recognize and to experience true joy. There is no detail

too small, no experience too common. We all have the *cognition*, but not the *recognition*. (That's why we're here, it seems to me—to increase our recognition.) Listen to this story:

God decided to become visible to a king and a peasant and sent an angel to inform them of the blessed event. "O king," the angel announced, "God has deigned to be revealed to you in whatever manner you wish. In what form do you want God to appear?"

Seated pompously on his throne and surrounded by awestruck subjects, the king royally proclaimed: "How else would I wish to see God, save in majesty and power? Show God to us in the full glory of power."

God granted his wish and appeared as a bolt of lightning that instantly pulverized the king and his court. Nothing, not even a cinder, remained.

The angel then manifested herself to a peasant saying: "God deigns to be revealed to you in whatever manner you desire. How do you wish to see God?"

Scratching his head and puzzling a long while, the peasant finally said: "I am a poor man and not worthy to see God face to face. But if it is God's will to be revealed to me, let it be in those things with which I am familiar. Let me see God in the earth I plough, the water I drink, and the food I eat. Let me see the presence of God in the faces of my family, neighbors, and—if God deems it as good for myself and others—even in my own reflection as well."

*God granted the peasant his wish, and he lived a long and happy life. (from *Peacemaking Day by Day*)*

Sometimes it is difficult to experience the joy of seeing God in our everyday life. Sometimes we want to see God in glory and power, like a fireworks display. Sometimes we sleepwalk our way through the routine of life and fail to recognize.

One way to get in touch with this "uncaused happiness," this inner light, is through contemplation or Centering Prayer. Richard Rohr wrote: "For 20 minutes perhaps, you choose to not cater to your thoughts, emotions, and programs for happiness. You are not allowing them to have you, but instead you have them... (you are) compassionately observing your thoughts and emotions and then compassionately letting go of them."

And so for joy, we give up what we think—what we think we need to be happy. A friend of mine once had a T-shirt: "Meditation: It's not what you think!" Get it? Joy is like that, too. It's not about thinking at all. True happiness is found in the present moment, by experiencing the world just as it is. Our thoughts about reality are not reality. And our thoughts can keep us from experiencing reality just as it is. They can often obstruct and distract us from the deepest joy that is found only in the present moment.

And so what I wish for all of us this Advent season is a sense of a deep, abiding peace and contentment, a sense of true joy, a sense of wholeness in the midst of brokenness and a liberation from suffering in the midst of suffering.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)