

## ***Joy Beyond Joy***

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### **Ancient Witness: John 16:20-22**

In Advent, those of us in the Christian tradition often celebrate certain aspects of the life of faith such as hope, love, peace and joy. Today we are going to focus on joy and happiness.

Now, the first thing that I want to say is that Jesus, as a spirit-person, experienced these aspects in his own life. As someone who had a deep connection with God and an awareness of a hidden, sacred reality, Jesus wanted others to have the same experience. Because Jesus had this connection and this awareness, his own life was marked with hope, love, peace and joy. And part of what Jesus was saying was this: “You, too, can be filled with joy! A joy beyond your wildest dreams.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but I really need to hear this. We live in some crazy, scary political times. And I’m like anybody else; I struggle against feelings of anxiety and worry. I go through periods of sadness. I want to have that kind of joy that Jesus had, the joy that is beyond joy. And I want the world to look at us and say, “How can they be joyful right now? Don’t they know how messed up things are?”

In the gospel of John, Jesus to his followers,

*I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

Because of his spiritual awareness, Jesus was a person filled with joy and happiness. And he wanted his followers to experience this same joyfulness that flows from spiritual awareness. Everything he said boils down to this, according to John.

True joy is not something we need to wait for or create; it is there all along. We only need to become aware of it. The experience of this joy, like the experience of the Sacred, is part of the continual, everyday experience of life, part of being itself. However, we have learned how to ignore this experience to focus on other “more important” things. Most of the time we lose track of our awareness of this joy and need to re-learn how to maintain this awareness. We need to unlearn so much and “become like children.”

We learn, instead, to focus on goals, achievement, acquiring things. Not that this is all bad, it’s just that they seem to take *all* of our attention.

Jesus, it seems to me, stood for something that is quite different. According to Jesus—and many other mystics of other traditions—*God wants us to feel happiness*. What we do should be motivated from joy, not shame, guilt or obligation. With Jesus, there is no *quid pro quo*. The motivation is not to “get” anything at all. With Jesus, we already have joy and abundance. The idea is to be able simply to recognize this and allow our actions to flow from this awareness.

Anthony de Mello, a Catholic priest from India who had an appreciation of other religious traditions, wrote about the difference between mysticism and theology. He said, theology is the art of telling stories about the divine. Mysticism is the art of *tasting* and *feeling* in your heart the inner meaning of such stories to the point that they transform you. Jesus was both. He tasted and felt the inner meaning in his heart, and he also would tell stories about the divine. But he was primarily interested in helping others become mystics, so they would *taste* and *feel* in their own hearts the reality of the sacred. De Mello has a great line:

*No one ever became drunk on the word, "wine."*

It is one thing to hear stories about wine, to hear people describe how it tastes and how it feels to drink it. But the point is that we need to move beyond hearing about other people's experience of wine and taste it, feel it and drink it for ourselves. True joy comes from our direct experience of the divine; it comes from being intoxicated with God.

And so the joy that Jesus experienced is about seeing an invisible world, an alternative reality. Julian of Norwich recognized our capacity for true lasting joy as being aware of God's presence everywhere. It is to realize, she said, that there is a "force of love moving through the universe." She wrote,

*The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.*

To behold the reality of God, this force of love, as Jesus did, is to experience the absolute fullness of joy.

This is the reaction of all those through the ages who have experienced the sacred reality. They are beside themselves with joy and happiness. From the outside it looks like they are crazy or drunk. This is why the Sufi mystic would write,

*The only relevant spiritual question is this: Why aren't you dancing with joy this very moment?*

This is what Jesus was talking about. When you experience that intimate, pre-rational connection with Abba, with God, then your joy is full and complete. You won't be able to keep from dancing. (The word, Abba, is what a small child would say as they are held close: "papa" or "momma.")

Plus there's one other thing: When you have this kind of joy, no one can rob you of it. But how often do we allow other people or circumstances rob us of our joy? Let me put it another way: If it *can* be taken away, it is *not* the joy that Jesus talked about. Holy joy is unique. Jesus said, "No one will take your joy from you." (16:22) True joy is not a momentary emotion of happiness; it is a profound experience of fulfillment. It is a state of being. Sometimes what I thought was joy wasn't joy after all, because it turned out to be dependent on outside circumstances. It was taken away from me by certain events. And so I say to myself that my joy must be here somewhere; I've lost track of it somehow. And so I need to discover it again.

Now please hear me: I'm not talking about happiness as a *feeling*—feeling zippy or upbeat. Psychology says that there are four basic emotional states: mad, sad, glad and afraid. (Like the

primary colors of red, yellow and blue.) The happiness of spiritual awareness is not one of those emotions that float around the surface of our consciousness. *This happiness is a state of being, a deep undercurrent of contentment that flows no matter what might be happening on the surface.*

In his book, *The Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen wrote some things that I have found to be very helpful. He said,

*This is the secret of the joy of the saints. From St. Anthony of the desert, to St. Francis of Assisi, to Frere Roger Schultz of Taize, to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, joy has been the mark of the people of God. That joy can be seen on the faces of the many simple, poor, and often suffering people who live today among great economic and social upheaval, but who can already hear the music and the dance in the Father's house. I, myself, see this joy every day in the faces of the mentally handicapped people of my community. All these holy men and women, whether they lived long ago or belong to our own time... have somehow pierced the meaning of true joy...*

*People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself...*

*In our world, joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below, joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist in God. (p. 117-118)*

This is the joy that is beyond both joy and sorrow. Jesus, called “the man of sorrows,” was also a person of complete joy. They coexist! The opposite of joy is not pain and suffering. One can be full of joy and yet experience suffering at the same time. This is good news! If we are sorrowful there is nothing wrong with us from a spiritual perspective. And so, for example, instead of fighting anxiety, we can simply accept it and observe that it is there. It has come to visit us for a while, but it can coexist with our joy.

And so we have moved into the practical part of the sermon. So many of us, when we are feeling depression or sadness, assume that we cannot have joy. Mistake! We do not have to wait until the clouds go away. Let them stay. In fact, it is probably counter productive to try to fight those clouds. True joy is beyond all that. In the mystical sense, joy is something not tied to objects or circumstances, but exists alongside failure and loss.

Here is the main statement for today: Attentiveness is the precondition for joy. “Attentive to what?” you may ask. Attentive to the present, and in the present, the presence of God. We announce this joy everyday in our liturgy: God is with us. Emmanuel. The deep mystery of the incarnation.

So we look at the heart of this very moment and see—God is with us. Pay attention! The problem with pain and suffering is not that they exist or that they are there, it is that sometimes we allow them to distract us. Nouwen writes:

*There is seldom a minute in my life that I am not tempted by sadness, melancholy, cynicism, dark moods, somber thoughts, morbid speculations and waves of depression. And often I allow them to cover up the joy of my Father's house.*

It is not that these feelings exist, it is that often we allow them to cover up the joy! Rather than fighting the negative (because we think that joy is the opposite of pain or sorrow), we can pay attention, feel the way we are deeply connected to the sacred and all things. The problem with sadness, and with positive feelings of achievement and pleasure, for that matter, is not that we have them. It is that often they can distract us from our deep connection with the sacred and all things. Because at that deep level, there is no winning or losing. There is only oneness and the joy it brings.

The Buddha said,

*The winner sows hatred  
Because the loser suffers.  
Let go of winning and losing  
And find joy. (The Dhammapada)*

Attentiveness is the precondition of joy, keeping our focus on that Sacred Presence and the Oneness it brings. It is like a short-wave radio operator who is able to focus on the message and not be distracted by all the static.

A philosopher once put it like this: Suppose you have this glass jar and some rock, pebbles and sand. Think of the rocks as the most important things in your life, those essential things you cannot do without. Think of the pebbles as important, but you could still survive if you lost them, such as your job or your house. Then think of the sand as all the other stuff in your life. Now, we run into trouble when we lose our focus and allow the sand to go into the jar first. What happens? You cannot fit in the pebbles and the rocks. No, in order to fit it all in, you must put in the large rocks first. Then add the pebbles, and watch them fill in the empty spaces. And last, add the sand and watch how it fills in all the rest, filling up the jar so there are no empty spaces. And it all fits. But you must keep your focus, your attention.

We are constantly filling our jar, over and over. What are we putting in first? Our materialistic world wants us to put in the sand first, shallow happiness derived from things and circumstances. There is one absolutely essential thing: the loving presence, the eternal connection, and it brings an indestructible joy beyond all joy. Of course, no one maintains a perfect state of union and deep joy all the time. It requires continual practice and effort.

In his book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how we live most of our lives without attentiveness. We tend to focus on getting things done, and our minds are off somewhere else. And he said,

*When you are being carried off by your sorrow, your fear, or your anger, you cannot really be present to the people and things you love.*

On the other hand, when we are being present, we live deeply in the moment, and we are able to experience the sacred that is hidden in the world.

De Mello once described our inability to be happy like going to a concert and realizing that you forgot to lock the car. And so there you sit. You're stuck. You can't leave, and you can't enjoy

the music. You're thinking about the car. This, he said, is life for most of us. We're preoccupied and unable to *enjoy the show*.

*When we think that happiness is about fun, pleasure, comfort, getting what we want, then we can't enjoy the show.* Happiness is about enjoying the show, the whole show, and nothing but the show, so help us, God. This is enlightenment. It's about embracing life as it comes—both positives and negatives—and not being preoccupied or worried about how we want things to turn out.

De Mello wrote:

*Before enlightenment, I used to get depressed.  
After enlightenment, I still get depressed, but the depression isn't what it used to be...*

*Like the dark clouds that come by.  
Before enlightenment, I identified with the clouds.  
After enlightenment, I identified with the sky.*

It's about the whole show. You can't take the sky without the dark clouds. But wow, what a sky!

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