



From the Pulpit: August 20, 2023

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Philippians 2:12–18

Joy Anyway, IV: Joy at Work

As we turn to scripture today we are reading from Philippians where Paul is writing a letter to his friends and repeatedly Paul offers them joy:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world, holding forth the word of life so that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the service of your faith, I rejoice, and I rejoice together with all of you; in the same way also you should rejoice and rejoice together with me.

In this sermon series on joy, we are no doubt trying to highlight the kind of joy found in the book of Philippians, and the title “Joy Anyway” is a reminder that joy is not achieved at some level of purity, where we can hide away with joy and ignore the hard stuff, but instead, that an integrated joy, an authentic joy is found, most fundamentally, here. Here amid the everyday, here amid the chaos, here amid the hard days, joy is made possible, and in fact, joy is most critical in that tender space of impossibility.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we hear this loud and clear. Paul’s joy is put in stark relief. He is in jail. His life is at stake. He might be, and eventually will be, put to death because of his hope in Jesus Christ, his longing to live as Jesus lived, his desire to build the community to which Jesus aspired.

“Here amid the everyday, here amid the chaos, here amid the hard days, joy is made possible, and in fact, joy is most critical in that tender space of impossibility.”

Yet over and over again, Paul says that joy is not only possible, but happening. Joy is happening for Paul, in the dank, miserable place of a 1st century jail. Today in chapter two, Paul claims to be rejoicing. Even as he is to be poured out, sacrificed, killed as the result of his faith, Paul is rejoicing. He rejoices because his friends in Philippi shine like stars amid the world’s hardships. He rejoices because they are doing the work of the gospel: caring for the poor, sharing resources, feeding the hungry, giving hope to the hopeless, making a way

through the darkness with the ones in the community who suffer and hurt the most.

The Philippian community works toward the good vision Jesus set in their midst, and even when it feels impossible to do so, they make a way out of no way. Paul rejoices, then, because his labor is not in vain, his life has purpose, his sacrifice is worth it.

Christ’s vision is being fulfilled there in Philippi.

This text is a reminder that religion and spirituality is not just happening in some ethereal out-there realm, nor is faith just internal or unseen.

The stuff of God is not somehow beyond reach or happening only at some deeper level. Paul is reminding us that this faith thing, this religion thing, this following Jesus thing: is the stuff of hands and feet delivering bread and water, faith is a bed in which to rest, a visit to a jail or hospital, food in a food desert, debt relief for the one on the brink of bankruptcy. You and the person sitting next to you have an opportunity every day to allow joy to seep into the everyday work of the gospel through your everyday work.

Joy at work might mean joy, literally at work. It might be the “we’re all in this together” comradery and synchronicity that can happen at your standing Wednesday afternoon 2:30 p.m. team meeting. It might mean your gifts and skills line up perfectly with the day’s task and so you can hum along, tending to the business in a way that is vibrant and passionate.

But joy at work might not be vocational for you. It might arise within the context of work but not because of the specific tasks that your actual employment requires.

If you work from home, maybe the joy at work is walking your dog after your 10 a.m. meeting, or eating lunch with the one you love, or being home for your kids 5 p.m. soccer game.

If you’re back in the office, maybe joy at work happens because you run into a friend on the train or walking downtown from one meeting to the next, you feel that mid-city rush of being a part of something bigger than yourself.

Joy at work might not even happen within the context of your place of employment.

You might find joy when you work on a new hobby, when you work on a new relationship, when you commit yourself deeply to a new volunteer role.

Joy at work might mean caring for your family, for your aging parent, your young child, your college student in crisis, your adult daughter who just gave birth to her first child, your first grandchild.

Or maybe joy at work happens as you work on yourself, caring for yourself after a season of caring for others, or picking up the pieces that are left after last month’s or year’s crisis, knitting your life back together after it all came unraveled in the face of loss and loss and loss and loss.

“He [Paul] rejoices because his friends in Philippi shine like stars amid the world’s hardships.”

Joy does not arise in a vacuum, away from sorrow or struggle. Joy and sorrow intermingle, and joy arises from within the work of this life.

I have two babies at home, and I am perpetually reminded that their work is equally hard, even if it looks to us

like the simple joys of childhood: the work of babies is to learn to crawl, to stand, to walk and talk, to eat and sleep, to move an object from one hand to another.

We only remember how much work these kinds of tasks take when they are taken from us through illness or injury, your arthritis or carpal tunnel reminding you that moving an object from one hand to another is actually a gift, skill; and deep joy, your broken hip a reminder that walking is something we need not take for granted. Your insomnia is a reminder that sleep is a gift and gift and gift and joy. Your cancer treatment induced nausea is a reminder that shared meals are the deepest kind of joy. In adulthood our work for a season might be learning to eat after a stroke, learning to walk after a fall, learning to slow down after a chronic illness changes everything.

Joy at work, then is embedded in the really real and the truly hard; an impossible kind of joy that breaks through when we least expect it.

Poet Ross Gay writes about gratitude, delight, and joy. He says that some people have accused him of turning up the volume on joy at a time in human history when the sorrows are too great: climate change, racism, global economic uncertainty, mass incarceration, wars and rumors of wars, international tensions, post-pandemic inequalities, mental health crises...there is some say, too much to talk about and joy should therefore take a back seat.

But Ross Gay takes a different slant, suggesting instead that joy is the radical and necessary act of resistance and belonging.¹ I think Paul who writes his letter to the Philippians would agree. The discipline of capturing joy, developing your delight muscle, metabolizing joy, slowing down and carrying one another through is exactly how we will make it through any number of sorrows.

Ross Gay suggests that joy is “the feeling of luminosity that comes from us when we help each other carry our sorrows.”² For him joy is always in community. Joy always happens together. Even he says, on those days when we just want to go and be alone, when we want to take a walk in the forest by ourselves, and drink deep of the joy found in solitude, Ross Gay suggests that even there, by ourselves, what is joyful in solitude is a mutual holding, a connectedness that unfolds within the forest, and that we might say we go into the forest to be alone, but instead, we are being brought into a kind of presence that is almost beyond our capacity to recognize.

Ross Gay says too, that joy is communal, that my joy can feed your joy and vice versa. For example, when one of you forwarded me a short video clip of Clay Scherb standing at graduation, my joy was deep and wide. My heart was full.

Thousands of students stood for graduation all around the country. It is completely ordinary. Why would the ordinary bring such joy? Clay suffered an impossible spinal cord injury almost one year ago now and it was the worst kind. Clay standing at graduation felt at the level of miracle, but was in fact the work, the labor, the care, not just of Clay but of a wide community of hope, a community laboring for the sake of someone else, doctors, nurses, family members, friends, students, strangers, others who have had similar spinal cord injuries, the whole wide community all finding joy in that one moment: Clay standing to receive his diploma.

“Joy does not arise in a vacuum, away from sorrow or struggle. Joy and sorrow intermingle, and joy arises from within the work of this life.”

The joy of that moment was intermingled with the multiple sorrows of the months that came before, but it was joy nonetheless, and it was a joy that was felt by hundreds. Someone else’s joy can light up your own joy.

Joy shimmered.

The discipline of capturing joy allows us to see the reality of our own connectedness, one to another, our own mutuality, our own need for one another.

So, may this week be a chance for you to find that mutual connection and be part of the communal joy not just of yourself but of others. May joy be unwrapped for you this week as a necessary act of resistance and a path toward delight. Amen.

1 “Joy as a Practice of Resistance and Belonging with Ross Gay.” *SoundCloud*, Tricycle Talks hosted by James Shaheen and Sharon Salzberg, 21 Mar. 2023, soundcloud.com/tricyclemag/ross-gay.

2 Doyle, Glennon. “216. How to Find Delight Today (and Every Day) with Ross Gay.” *Spotify*, We can do hard things by Glennon Doyle, 6 June 2023, open.spotify.com/episode/2rPuMEBAtkJXalkw6PtHNd.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

God of midsummer dreams and delights,
vine-ripe blackberries and soft skinned peaches,
God of cardinal flower and cup plants, hummingbird and heron,
to you, O Lord, we lift up our souls.
We rejoice in the gifts of August, as we notice the transitions of this season:
the changing light, bustling school supply aisles, and in the sage-scented air.

Holy God, we trust in you.
You meet us in the places of possibility and tenderness,
at the water's edge where nature's power and beauty can overwhelm.
You abide with us at the bedsides of encountering unforeseen illness.
You join us at the bittersweet embrace at the dorm room door,
Greet us this week at the thresholds of high school classrooms
where teachers have been busily preparing for students to return.
Let there be joy in learning.
Let there be a friend to nod to in the hallway.
Let there be safety and welcome.

Make us mindful of your mercies Lord,
As we pray for an unfathomable loss in Maui, and for too many places where fires threaten,
Especially Yellowknife and British Columbia, Spokane and Washington.
Bring your tender mercies Lord to the people in the path of tropical storm Hilary.
Let there be dry ground to shelter on.
Your mercy is known to us in the miracle of migrants found off the coast of Spain after a month at sea,
And so we ask for safe passage for those who must flee dire circumstances.
Hear our ongoing prayer for your deep peace to seep into the places of unrest and violence
which force too many to risk their lives in the hope of refuge.

In a world where the only certainty is uncertainty, let your steadfast love guide us through our work, school, and daily lives. Let your grace be our teacher as we find new homes, make difficult financial decisions, search for a new job, and seek to mend relationships. Forgive us when we bring our missteps before you. Relieve the troubles of our hearts and bring us out of distress.

Let Jesus Christ, the one who calmed the storm and said, "Do not be afraid," be our comfort and our guide, praying as he teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

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