

“DIVINE JOY”

Luke 1:26-55

December 17, 2017

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Last week, a friend shared online a video of a children’s choir, young elementary-age kids, about 15 or 20 of them, singing in a church service. They were quite a well-behaved choir, obviously attentive to their director, singing earnestly and pretty well. But at the end of the second or third row, there was this one little girl. She’s singing. But she’s not *just* singing. She’s moving to the beat. She’s swaying, bouncing, clapping, snapping her fingers, doing a little body percussion. Her feet are tapping. She starts to throw in some dance moves, and some hand motions. This goes on through the entire song, maybe three minutes.

Meanwhile, all the rest of the choir is standing, fairly still for young kids, just where they have been told to stand, eyes on the director, singing very nicely. They’re focused, definitely engaged in the song and in their performance. They are not unhappy by any means, in fact they are mostly smiling. But this one little girl has something entirely different.

And the most memorable line of the song says it all “There ain’t nothing gonna steal my joy.” You couldn’t call it anything else: I don’t think I ever saw a clearer demonstration of joy. It made me laugh and brought tears to my eyes ... and I confess I watched the whole thing several times.

Probably I was enthralled partly because I knew I’d be talking about joy this morning. And I had already started to think that joy might be the most difficult to talk about of the traditional quartet of Advent words. I mean, you either have it or you don’t, right? There’s no five-step method guaranteed to deliver joy. You can’t summon it up on command, can you? I know the Bible tells us – commands us? – to rejoice, at least 50 or more times, in fact. But I always want to be careful with that. I’m reluctant to urge too much rejoicing on people who might not feel they have the ability to rejoice or much to rejoice about. And don’t know exactly how to suggest that one go about “rejoicing” if it’s not coming naturally.

Philosophers and theologians have suggested that we have a “duty to delight.” But speaking of “duty” and “delight” in the same sentence is quite strange to us. Isn’t spontaneity the very nature of joy and delight? Can joy be “required”? How can that be joy?

So these questions were in my mind as I watched and absorbed the joy from this singing and dancing little girl.

Several random thoughts ensued:

She didn't seem to have any more reason for this immense joy than the other children – perhaps she somehow has a different way of viewing the world and engaging life.

Joy often goes hand in hand with praising God.

Small things like that choir caught on video can sometimes serve to remind us that there is still joy in the world, that there are still *reasons* for rejoicing, and that we can rejoice.

Joy is contagious. I felt it as I watched. I shared it with my family. Online that video has been shared with thousands of people... spreading the joy.

Joy does not come in being like everybody else. Joy is in being who God created YOU to be, doing what God means you to do.

In today's scripture also we get to witness to spontaneous joy: when we read and talk about Mary's song (as we call verses 39-55), we most often focus on the vision of peace and justice. That's certainly important and I'll come back to it. But first, think about how it begins: "My spirit rejoices."

I believe it's really significant that her words begin with joy. We should stop and ponder that a bit.

Here, too, we see joy and praise of God intertwined. Does joy come from praising God? Or is praise a response to joy? Perhaps it isn't possible to say which is the cause and which the effect.

Now Mary is certainly not like everyone else. Her joy comes as she embraces her own unique identity and calling.

I imagine that most of us, if we'd gotten the news that Mary got from the angel, would have been inclined to focus on the difficulties and might not have so readily found the joy in it. Certainly there were plenty of reasons to be skeptical, anxious, or afraid. Mary chooses to focus on the joy.

I think this is what helps her to see the possibilities, to understand and speak about God's vision of a world of shalom and justice.

Because joy is freeing. Joy takes the roof off, colors outside the lines, thinks outside the box, bursts the seams. Joy takes us outside ourselves, and at the same time allows us to be fully ourselves. Joy fuels our imaginations so we can picture what might be possible.

But where does it come from?

I found some help with that question in the book we discussed at Faith Book Club in November. *Tattoos on the Heart* is written by Gregory Boyle, a Catholic priest who

works with gang members and ex-gang members in Los Angeles, which, although it sounds grim, is anything but. There is a massive amount of tragedy, violence, neglect and hurt in Boyle's world. But he also describes lives transformed by compassion and unconditional love. He tells how the trajectory of a young person's life can be completely changed when someone believes in him or her. To go from thinking you will die before you are 20 to envisioning a future is a tremendous gift. To be treated as if you have something to offer is a revelation. To go from believing you're worthless to a realization that you matter is huge.

Everything changes when you see yourself in a different way. You start seeing the whole world in a new way. You notice things. You realize that life is a gift. You learn new things, new ways. You envision possibilities. You see that you can choose the good. You realize that you have more gifts to offer the world than anger. You can claim your own gifts. You become somebody who can give back.

And humor, wonder, gratitude, delight... even joy become possible. And those things continue to be transformative and healing and hope-inducing.

Boyle says that this is fundamentally about learning to see what God sees in us. God's love for us, he says, isn't reluctant or dutiful or condescending. No, he says: God delights in us. Amazing though it may be, we bring *God* joy. Let that sink in.

That truth has been often obscured through the church's history, because we have stressed the fact that human beings are sinful and broken and in need of God's grace (which is true enough). We, rightly, have not wanted to minimize or ignore dishonesty and injustice and cruelty. But there is this other side, this perhaps more fundamental truth about who we *really* are, who we ultimately are.

The scriptures tell us over and over about God's delight in his creation... and in us, the people God has made.

Genesis 1 describes God creating the land, the seas, the plants, the animals, and finally human beings, looking at what he made and declaring it very good.

That creative process is ongoing. God speaks through Isaiah: "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I create my people as a delight" (Isaiah 65:18)

The prophet Zephaniah writes that God "will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love." (3:17)

Micah says that God "delights in showing mercy." (7:18)

And then there is Jesus. Jesus is God's ultimate "yes" to humanity. If God becoming one of us doesn't say that we matter, what does? Perhaps this joy thing doesn't need to be as hard as I thought it was. Perhaps it's only hard when we try to conjure up some joy out of our own will power... and perhaps that

IS the wrong place to start. What if, instead, we begin with the amazing notion that we bring joy to God, that God loves us and delights in us.

That might be an unfamiliar idea, especially if you haven't experienced much of anyone delighting in you – but it is oh so powerful.

When we bask in God's joy, we see ourselves differently. We see the world differently. We maybe even see God's other children with delight too, just as God sees them. We eventually find ourselves sharing God's joy.

Boyle writes: "We try to find a way, then, to hold our fingertips gently to the pulse of God. We watch as our hearts begin to beat as one with the One who delights in our being. Then what do we do? We exhale that same spirit of delight into the world and hope for poetry." (p. 147)

Amen

Resources:

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion by Gregory Boyle.