

“Cultivating Joy”

Proper 12A (July 26, 2020)

Scripture: Psalm 98: 1a, 4-6; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 15: 11-32

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, God. Amen.

Most everyone has heard the prodigal son story from the Gospel of Luke. When my daughters learned the story in Sunday School, the eldest one concluded: “the youngest one always gets the best stuff.” And that’s pretty much the interpretation of the elder son in Luke’s story. Another daughter, my younger, felt that because the younger son had suffered, the father had rewarded him fairly. It’s an interesting insight into the dynamics of family systems, going back to Bible times, and carrying forward into today.

The younger son wanted his share of his father’s inheritance, which according to law was one-third of the estate. It was not acceptable to request one’s inheritance while the father was still alive. It was as though the younger son considered his father already dead.¹ The young man lived irresponsibly, and soon the money had evaporated. And a famine came to the land. He managed to get a job feeding pigs. For a Jew, that was hitting rock-bottom. The son had an imaginary conversation with his father, and decided to go back home: “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” The story goes on to say that when the father saw him coming in the distance, he was filled with compassion and ran to meet him. Running was considered an undignified action for a man of his status, but he was propelled by emotion. There was no mention of how long the younger son had been away from home, other than long enough to blow away one-third of dad’s estate and cause him great suffering and grief.

The elder son felt slighted, wronged even. His hard work hadn’t scored a party in recognition. “Listen!” he said. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” Not even a goat. And his brother got the fatted calf. Father tried to appease him by saying “you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” And unsaid – you’ll get two-thirds of my estate when I die. “But we **had** to celebrate and rejoice,” rejoined dad. The story is a wonderful account of forgiveness and reconciliation, and of joy which has been born from despairing.

Listen now, as I read the same story from the perspective of the father, as told in the dramatic poem written by Maura Eichner:

The Father. After Luke 15: 11-32

Never had the old man made such a journey.
His robes enfolded him like driving wind.
No one remembered the old man running. Even fire
had never moved him. His estates were the light
of the town. Yet, there he was, running to a dark
figure huddling the road. Love was flood-water

carrying him forward. Some tried to dike the water;
nothing could hold him. Love loosed a wind

of words: "My son is coming home." Dark grief behind, the father ran, arms open as a light. He had to lift the boy before his son's fire of sorrow burned the father's sandals. Journey?

The old man could remember no other journey but this homecoming: he held his son in the fire of his arms, remembering his birth: water and fire, Servants ran along thrusting at the wind of excitement what shall we do? what torchlight prepare? "Bathe away the pig-pen-slopping dark

that cloaks my son. Prepare a banquet. Jewel the dark with fires. My son was dead. My son is afire with life. The land is fruitful. Joy is its water. Where is my eldest son? The end of the journey is ours. My son, do you grieve? turn from the light to say you are unrewarded? Son, is the wind

from the south closer to you than me? is the wind of your doubt stronger than my love for you? Water your hardness, my son. Be a brother to the dark of your brother's sorrow. Be a season of light to his coming home. You will make many a journey through cities, up mountains, over abysses of fire

but for tonight and tomorrow, my eldest, fire your heart, strike at its stone. Let it journey toward dawning, be a thrust at the dark your brother will never forget. Find a woman of water and fire, seed her with sons for my name and wind-supple daughters for bearing daughters and sons of light. I am a father of journeys. I remind you the dark can be conquered by love-blasting fire. I made air and wind a compassionate homeland. Be at home in the light."²

Joy born of dark despair and grief, and a homecoming.

This next story is a true account of wartime despair, and the way Iranians managed to transform hardship and fear into joy. In her article "When Savoring a Pleasant Moment is a Radical Act," Ari Honarvar describes the challenges of life during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, which snuffed out the lives of over a million people. "Life was far from joyful. We Iranians had become accustomed to daily funerals, food rations, political oppression, and an ongoing threat of bombs and missiles.

On top of that, consuming alcohol, dancing, and playing non-sanctioned music had suddenly become illegal under the post-revolution laws". Honarvar continues "But even with these external challenges, I observed a few adults' ability to become scrappy and use all available resources for the essential task of nurturing joy, stability, and a sense of humor. Faced with food rationing, they experimented with new recipes. Faced with wartime blackouts, they told stories and recited poems. As the threat of bombing loomed, they told jokes and made everyone laugh until our eyes watered."

“For Persians, one of our most precious ways to summon joy is with poetry. I remember one night, in particular, in my home city of Shiraz, Iran, during the war. While sirens blared and the electricity was shut off, warning of an imminent attack, my family and I (feeling especially brave) snuck to our rooftop to watch the anti-aircraft missiles shoot into the air. To my 7-year-old eyes, the brilliant red patterns in the pitch-black sky rivaled the most magnificent fireworks display. But underneath the awe there was a simmering terror brewing in my belly of not knowing who was going to die next. Was it going to be me? My best friend? My sister in Tehran? My teacher? And then someone from another rooftop shouted a verse of Rumi’s poetry into the clear night air:

‘Even if, from the sky, poison befalls all,
I’m still sweetness
wrapped in sweetness
wrapped in sweetness...’

“Even as a young child, I could feel the ecstasy of these verses in my heart, radiating to every cell of my being. In an instant, my world not only became sane, but infinite and glorious. And what bomb could ever touch that?.....Perhaps the most radical act of resistance in the face of adversity is to live joyfully.”³

According to Psychologist and trauma expert Peter Levine, cultivating joy is an important component of resilience as it increases our capacity to face difficulties... When we continue to cultivate joy, we gain the ability to feel the overwhelm without becoming overwhelmed ourselves.”

It would have been easy to be overwhelmed in Nigeria, under the threat of Boko Haram. When Tani Adewumi and his family realized they needed to flee from this scourge that would surely have killed them all, they traveled to America to start a new life. For a time, they lived in a homeless shelter. Tani’s mother became a dishwasher, and his father was an Uber driver, while Tani went to public school. While still in Nigeria, Tani and his brother Austen had made their own chess game by cutting up paper into little squares for the game pieces. Tani joined his school’s chess club, and got very good at the game. He’s won the K-3 New York State chess championship, and has his sights set even higher! Tani’s family has persistence, an unwavering faith in God and a positive attitude.⁴

And of course, there is joy from music, from hearing singing playing or composing it. The Beatles’ “Here Comes the Sun” is a standout for sheer joyousness. During COVID’s most horrendous hours, some hospitals played “Here Comes the Sun,” repeatedly, to lift people’s spirits, and bolster resilience. Psychologist Maria Sirois, author of *A Short Course in Happiness After Loss* writes: “The happiness that helps in great difficulty is realistic. It recognizes fears and anxieties. It looks for meaning. It nourishes and sustains us.” Unexpectedly positive outcomes can happen after a life-shattering crisis or global disaster. Two months after the World Trade Center terrorist attacks in 2001, a University of Pennsylvania survey of over 4,000 Americans found that they felt more gratitude, hope, kindness and love than they did before 9/11.⁵

“People who study the brain have shown that listening to music you enjoy can cause a release of dopamine, a chemical that increases feelings of happiness,” says Sarah Lenz Lock, who is AARP’s senior vice president of Policy and Brain Health. *AARP Magazine* put together a playlist of Songs of Hope and Happiness on Spotify, some of which are: “I Will Survive,” “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” “What a Wonderful World,” and “What the World Needs Now (Is Love),” and “Here Comes the Sun.”

The Beatles' song "Here Comes the Sun" was not written on a sunny day; it was created from frustration and stress. Nothing was going well for the Beatles: business meetings with bandmates and accountants; and John Lennon was recuperating from a car crash.

George Harrison slipped away, went to Eric Clapton's house, borrowed a guitar, and "Here Comes the Sun" came to him as he walked around Clapton's garden. The day of the song's mixing was the last time the four Beatles were ever together in a recording studio. From such tension was born one of the happiest songs of our lives."⁵

Meike Bartels is a leading expert on researching the genetics of joy. Since 2016 the research professor and her team at Vrije University in Amsterdam have discovered 304 "happy" genes. "We've found that 35 to 40 percent of the difference between people's happiness levels is genetic," she says. Bartels believes we have to respect the unique things that make each of us happy. They're wired in us. So that accounts for why some people love hiking, or yoga, baking cookies or jogging. Or poetry. Or chess. And others like jazz, or Mozart, or the Beatles. "People's likes, dislikes and preferences are a deep part of who we are — part of our own unique DNA."⁵

The Dalai Lama tells us about laughter and humor in the cultivation of joy: "It is much better when there is not too much seriousness...then we can be completely relaxed." He had met Japanese scientists who assured him that "wholehearted laughter... is very good for your heart and your health in general." It's true. Think about times when you've been grieving the loss of someone dear. You start recounting stories about their life; and before long the telling can turn to laughter, till our sides ache.

Also from *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu described generosity of the spirit, "in which one can become an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all of those around us." He says: "Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but you can also give it your joy."⁶

We are capable of cultivating joy from realizing that we are God's beloved children, all unique: summoning joy from poetry, immersing yourself in your favorite music, exercising your mind or body with a challenging game, making your own joy out of resilience and creativity, from your faith. All from God, all uplifting, all healing. Amen

¹M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press. 239-241. 2009.

²Eichner, Maura. "The Father" in *Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry*. New York.: Oxford University Press. 1997. 222-223.

³Ari Honarvar. "When Savoring a Pleasant Moment Is a Radical Act: Small joys are essential for resilience." *Yes! Magazine.org*. pp. 45-47

⁴Tanitoluwa Adewumi, with Kayode and Oluwatoyin Adewumi and Craig Borlase. *My Name Is Tami...And I Believe in Miracles*. W Publishing Group. Nashville. 2020.

⁵Sari Harrar. "Happiness in Hard Times." *AARP: The Magazine*. June-July 2020. pp. 56- 59, 75.

⁵Sarah Lenz Lock, AARP senior vice president of Policy and Brain Health and Global Council on Brain Health executive director. *AARP: The Magazine*. June-July 2020. p. 59.

⁵"Songs of Hope and Happiness." Spotify: [j.mp/AARPSpotify](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX0XUf1C20954).

⁶His Holiness The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams. *The Book of Joy: Lasting happiness in a changing world*. NY. 2016. pp. 216, 274-275

