

“Oh, joy.” (13Dec2020)
1Thessalonians5:16-24

Well, I really hate to do this to you.

Last week, I offered a whole truckload of commiseration, knowing and sharing your misery and need for God to come offer some comfort. Comfort, comfort my people. I got to proclaim for you last week the promise of God’s comfort. I appreciated hearing how helpful that word was for many of you.

This week seems the opposite, practically ignoring your reality. This week the key word is joy. I’m sorry. If I asked for your emotions and feelings and reactions to the world, if you typed how you’re doing into the comments or sent me a note to check in later, I doubt the term “joy” would appear in the listings.

Still, it’s inescapable. See, today is Joy Sunday. This 3rd Sunday of Advent always has lectionary Bible readings full of joy. Technically, it’s known as Gaudete Sunday, which is Latin for Hey-Everybody-Get-Joyful-Now-Because-I’m-Telling-You-To Sunday.

If you happen to have or can picture a set of Advent candles where they don’t all match, this is the odd candle out, the solo pink one surrounded by purples. Advent started as a penitential season, more somber, repenting of sins, the fast before the feast of Christmas, just as Lent is the fast before the Easter festival. Advent was even originally also 40 days, and instead of the lovely hopeful blues we have now, the color used to be penitent purple. This 3rd Sunday was a little pause from penitence, the rose or pink colored warmth of a break for joy.

Typically, we wouldn’t want a somber Advent. We prefer pretty and festive, not stark and severe. So usually we’d probably favor more joy and less penitence.

But this year has been a purple year. Even the hoping blues may be a bit much. So certainly the pink of joy feels ridiculous, out of the question. The radio keeps singing it’s the “most wonderful time of the year.” Even if this is the most wonderful time of it, still the overall sentiment seems it’s pretty

terrible. The most wonderful part is like asking what is the tastiest section of a moldy old boot.

So I didn’t ask for it to be Gaudete Sunday, to be You-Better-Watch-Out-You-Better-Not-Pout-You-Better-Rejoice Sunday.

If that weren’t tough enough, our reading from 1st Thessalonians seems downright silly: “Always be joyful,” it begins. Laughable—but not in an especially joyous way. More like sarcasm: ha. Fat chance.

Incidentally, this little nugget is the shortest verse of the New Testament. We often hear that “Jesus wept” is shortest. But in the original Greek, that compassionate commiseration weighs in at three words and 15 letters, whereas this “rejoice always” sneaks in with two words and one less letter. If we wanted a synopsis, a shorthand sentiment of the New Testament, it might be this joy. Even if we don’t particularly want to be joyful and don’t enjoy it very much.

See, I’m pretty sure this can’t be a commandment about your moods. If this were telling you to put on a cheery face, “sing Hallelujah, c’mon, get happy,” good luck with that.

Rather, for the place of joy in faith, I’d like to share a bit from Henri Nouwen, a popular devotional writer. He wrote:

Joy is not the same as happiness...Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God’s love for us...[S]orrow and joy can exist together. That isn’t easy to understand, but when we think about some of our deepest life experiences...I dare even to say: ‘My grief was a place where I found joy.’

I appreciate that sense of joy as deeper than a happy mood, more like a state of being. I’m not as crazy, though, about part of how Nouwen continued:

Still, nothing happens automatically in the spiritual life. Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety

and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.*

If that works for you, great. Go ahead and work on your spiritual life and choose joy. I shouldn't argue with one of the most inspirational and popular Christian authors anyway. So it may resonate as helpful for you to think of choice for joy every day.

But the challenge of my task is that I can't give you joy or make you joyful, and I risk having it backfire by trying to say what is *supposed* to make you joyful. Joy, after all, can't be compelled; it is a gift! I think in Greek, the two words are even related—gift as *charis* and joy as *chara*. And joy is also related to thanksgiving, *eucharist*. We give thanks for the gift of joy. So if you're longing for joy, how do you add this to your year's gift wishlist?

If it's a gift, joy isn't first about moods or feelings. It's not circumstantial, caused by current events like the weather or a song, nor prevented by sadness, or being worried or anxious. Maybe more surprising, joy isn't about you personally. As a gift, it involves relationships.

In the New Testament, Paul is often joyful because of his congregations. He writes to the Thessalonians that what brings him joy is you, you, you! Over and over in this letter, he repeats it (2:19, 2:20, 3:9). And today's invitation to be always joyful is for them to recognize the relationships, too. Maybe joy finds an entrance by recognizing this together. It helps me; simply remembering you fills me with something more, and that's in spite of the sadness and grief of how complicated it is to be in relationship this year.

Still more, with what Henri Nouwen focused on, it's also about God being in relationship with you. Again, in the New Testament, this is joy that is about Jesus coming and relating to you. Joy comes with the greeting of Gabriel before Jesus' birth, as we sing in Holden Evening Prayer: rejoice, O highly favored, for God is with you (Luke 1:28). At his birth, shepherds are greeted with good news of great joy (Luke 2:10). It continues that we

rejoice even in suffering with Christ (Acts 5:41, 1 Peter 4:13), yet finds more after the resurrection, racing from an empty tomb (Matthew 28:8) when his followers touch the nail marks in his hands and rejoice to recognize him with them again (John 20:20).

With that unbreakable insistence on relationship, because God so loves you, Jesus repeats that he wants his joy to be in you and for that joy to be complete (John 16). And so he is like a shepherd who goes after a lost sheep so that there may be rejoicing, so he can carry you back with joy (Matthew 18:13, Luke 15:5). He will find you, wherever you are—today, this year, ever—and not even death can take you away from him. Bringing Joy to the World, “he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found,” and that is how and why we “repeat the sounding joy.” If God said it, God will do it (1Thess5:24). Maybe at least, even if you go out weeping, you can trust that you will be brought back and come again with joy (Psalm 126:6).

Hymn: “Joy to the World” (ELW 267)

* found on <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/excerpts/view/14116>