

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
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“Joy”

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An author I came across recently, Anuschka Rees, identified three broad sources of Joy. The first is called Pure Serenity. This is the joy that comes from eating a favorite food, deeply laughing at a guilt free joke, hearing some favorite music, like the ring of the hand bells, or recalling delightful memories.

The second source of joy she identified is Pure Challenge. This is Joy from a sense of accomplishment: Exercising, job interviews, writing essays, reading a challenging book, or building something with our own hands. We may or may not enjoy the activity, but we feel the satisfaction afterward.

Finally, she suggests a third source of joy as Pure Meaning. This joy comes from participation in an activity we consider worthwhile: Contributing to a social cause, helping your neighbor, making eco- friendly improvements, or general self-improvement.

On a mission trip to Jamaica many years ago our group was asked to work with two rural Presbyterian Churches outside Montego Bay. They asked us to provide a vacation bible school experience for the children of these rural churches. It was a rough trip for many of us. 14 of us bunked in the Pastor’s house where the bug netting we slept under provided little defense from many itchy bites. Overnight the temperatures cooled to 85 degrees and days were, as the Reggae group Third world sings, “96 degrees in the shade.” Living conditions for the locals were very challenging with rampant poverty and 7 or 8 people living in tin huts half the size of my garage. And when it rained the roads and landscape became a gigantic mess.

But when it rained the children and adults broke out in a most exuberant song. It did not matter that their homes were going to leak, their clothes were going to get soaked, their small shops would flood... they began to sing... “It’s raining, all around me, I can feel it, it’s a latter rain. Ride on Jesus, he call for rain, until we are wet, until we are soaked, in the latter rain.”

The Song and refrain were repeated over and over as the children would sing, dance, smile and laugh out in the rain. It was a tremendously joyful scene.

In the liturgical calendar of the church, the Third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete Sunday.” The readings for Gaudete Sunday help us understand Christian joy. Theologian Henri Nouwen described joy this way, “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.”

There are a variety of ways Christians have traditionally understood Joy. I recently read about a clever television commercial comparing hamburgers from two fast food restaurants in a taste test setting. Burger A was a fresh, hot, juicy burger. Burger “B” was tough, old, and

uninviting. A guy walking by is asked which burger he would choose. His answer, I want Burger “B” because eating it would be sheer misery.” This man clearly likes to suffer; he takes Burger B, chokes it down and even asks for another. Some Christians are like this. They find the pain and suffering of discipleship a pleasure. They mistake suffering to be their joy. This is unfaithful and unnatural.

Then, other Christians are into pleasure, instead of pain. They see the Christian life as a gateway to all sorts of personal rewards. To them, the Christian life leads to popularity, success, and personal prosperity. Sometimes this kind of pleasure finds fulfillment in the wrong things, or forgets a responsibility to the common good. Joy, without responsibility is just as wrong as the first example.

A third approach teaches that life is affected by how we relate joy, happiness and serenity to our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In the UCC’s Weekly Seeds resource Talita Arnold writes, “There is no jingle bells joy brought with the swipe of a credit card.” And Dennis Olson adds, “Joy is rooted in the confidence that God will keep God’s promises.”

There are times I feel overwhelmed by problems. How will we ever reach the day where all are treated equally? What can we do about detrimentally changing weather patterns and disappearing shoreline? I think of military men, women and others who will be away from their families again this holiday. I wonder how we can reduce gridlock in government, or reduce income gaps between the rich and poor. I worry about our sisters and brothers in our church and other loved ones who have faced recent illness, surgery, or a death in their family. This and a lot more, and sometimes these worries overwhelm me. When this happens, despair may not be far behind.

Christians believe that the day is coming when all things will be made whole. We believe God is at work in every effort we make for peace and wholeness, even if the peace is partial and the wholeness only glimpsed for a moment. We are leaning toward that day when all will be whole, not merely improved a little but all creation will be made shining and radiantly new. This is God’s promise through Abraham and Sarah when God blessed them to become a blessing to “all the families of earth.” This is the call of faith, to hold on to God’s promises and trust God’s wholeness and peace even when all evidence points to the contrary.

As I learned more about the Jamaican rain song. I realized it isn’t really a rain song at all; it is a song of Christian faith. The children and adults living in a place that seems most desperate, are dancing and singing at the promise of being soaked in God’s “latter rain.”

To understand the “latter rain” we might think of the stages involved in producing a good harvest: the planting, the germination of the seed by the early rains, the maturation period, and finally the ripening period brought on by the last rains of the season, also called “the latter rain.”

For Christians, the “latter rain” is a symbol of promise, assuring the complete outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Joy just may lie in our ability to connect our long list of struggles with the sustaining and everlasting promises of God. Somewhere in that mysterious intersection, we find the ability to dance and sing, and sew peace in the presence of life’s challenges.

I close by sharing the last two verses of a most favorite childhood church song, “I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black; It’s hard to dance with the devil on your back; They buried my body and they thought I’d gone, But I am the dance and I still go on.

They cut me down and I leapt up high, I am the life that’ll never, never die; I’ll live in you if you’ll live in me; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.”

AMEN