

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
July 9, 2017

Song of Solomon 2:8 - 13

Psalm 145:8 - 15

Romans 7:15 – 25a

Matthew 11:16 – 19, 25 - 30

From today's gospel: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I don't know about you, but lately I've been hearing and thinking quite a bit about "joy." If you were able to be here last week, you heard Dee Anne's sermon about "joyful obedience." Today, we hear joy expressed in some of the scripture readings. The passage from Song of Solomon describes in vivid imagery the joy of love. This poem describes love in terms of bounding gazelles, flowers, birds, bountiful fruit trees and singing – that is a lot of joy! The psalm, too, is a hymn of praise that, with both gratitude and joy, describes the enduring compassion and love of God. And, of course, for this summer's book group we are reading *The Book of Joy*, a book that describes what both the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu had to say on this topic during a five-day meeting in 2015.

The subtitle of *The Book of Joy* is "Lasting Happiness in a Changing World." I have to admit, I can be skeptical about books that seem to promise paths to happiness neatly arranged in chapters or step-by-step instructions. You know what I mean, books with titles like "Five Steps to a Happy Life" or "Seven Easy Steps for Raising Perfect Children" —those aren't real titles, but I think you get the point. And then there are the wildly best-selling books about tidying up and changing our lives through decluttering that encourage us only to keep those things that "spark joy." Now, I'm not saying that those books (or at least what I've read about them) haven't had a positive influence on me as my husband and I have embarked on a two-year project to clear out our attic and basement, but life just isn't quite as simple as these books can make it seem. And, certainly, the "joy" that is "sparked" by a comfy sweater or the "perfect" serving platter is not what the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu are talking about.

So, what is this "joy" that these men are discussing? It is something that is deeper and longer lasting than what we might call "happiness." It is a sense of well-being, serenity, wonder, and gratitude. Living a joyful life does NOT mean never experiencing pain or unhappiness, but it does affect how we respond to negative events. And, certainly, both the Dalai Lama and Bishop Tutu have experienced tremendous difficulties and have witnessed some of the worst of human suffering. The Dalai Lama has spent more than fifty-six years in exile after risking his life when he had to flee from Tibet to India. Bishop Tutu suffered under apartheid in South Africa and then, after helping accomplish the goal of dismantling the apartheid government, he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, uncovering the violence and human rights abuses

perpetrated during the apartheid era. These men have had more challenging lives than most of us can imagine, and yet they live lives filled with joy. If you have a chance to read the book, you will see the joy they experience in their friendship with each other—you can even see it in the photo on the cover. If you have ever seen Desmond Tutu smile or do a little dance, you will know his joy. And, try doing a Google search with the key words “Dalai Lama” and “giggle,” and you will be struck by the contagious laugh of this man who daily contemplates the most serious of human social justice concerns. These men experience profound joy even in the face of both public and personal challenges.

So, how do they do it? Definitely not in “five easy steps,” but they do have a perspective that can provide all of us a helpful roadmap. Their central message is that we can only experience joy if we learn to look outward instead of inward, if we reach out with compassion to others instead of being too self-absorbed. This is the key—by expanding our view and recognizing the suffering of others, we will experience less pain and more joy. When asked how he is able to endure the oppression of his people, the Dalai Lama said, “When I look only at that...then I worry...But when I look at the world, there are a lot of problems...When we see these things, we realize that not only do we suffer, but so do many of our human brothers and sisters. So when we look at the same event from a wider perspective, we will reduce the worrying and our own suffering.” Likewise, when Archbishop Tutu was asked how he deals with the suffering he personally experiences when dealing with his own cancer and the sometimes painful treatments, he said, “I think we ought not to make people feel guilty when it is painful. It *is* painful, and you have to acknowledge that it is painful. But actually, even in the midst of that pain, you can recognize the gentleness of the nurse who is looking after you. You can see the skill of the surgeon who is going to be performing the operation on you.” The author who pulled together the conversations between these two men into the book we are reading summarized it this way: “In a surprising way, what the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama were saying is that the way we heal our own pain is actually by turning to the pain of others. It is a virtuous cycle. The more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience, and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others.”

So, this is their fundamental advice—we need to focus outward with compassion instead of inward with self-absorption. It sounds simple, and as some of the science they cited indicates, we humans might even be at least partially hard-wired to operate this way, but it certainly isn’t always easy to accomplish. This kind of perspective takes practice to cultivate—we need to work at it. The Dalai Lama gets up at 3 a.m. every day and meditates for five hours; Bishop Tutu “sleeps in” until 4 a.m. and spends three to four hours a day in prayer. Wow--as one person asked at our first evening book group gathering, is that what it takes to be joyful? The implication being that if this is what it takes, most of us will never get there! And, it’s true, most of us don’t have the time or even inclination to pray or meditate to that extent, but the point is that it takes effort to expand our perspective – we need to practice thinking of others, we need some of kind of spiritual discipline to help redirect our focus toward others and identify ways we can reach out to them with compassion.

We can see in today's gospel, that Jesus knows this, too. The passage begins with Jesus' criticism of those who don't pay attention to those around them, who are too self-absorbed to recognize the experience of those right in front of them. After this criticism, he turns to God in prayer, and then issues the beautiful invitation near the end of the passage, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The invitation doesn't stop there, though. Jesus continues by encouraging those who are listening to take up his "yoke." A yoke implies a kind of allegiance, but also a kind of discipline and obedience—the kind of "joyful obedience" Dee Anne spoke of last week. Jesus says that taking up his yoke, following him, means that we can learn from him. And what does he say we will learn? We will learn gentleness and humility. Humility means that we don't put ourselves above others, that we abandon self-centeredness and turn with compassion toward others. This, Jesus says, is what will give us rest. This, as the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu have said, is what will bring us joy.

We all take up this yoke differently. I think it's safe to say that most of us won't engage in hours of daily prayer and meditation, but we can develop regular practices that help accomplish what Jesus has invited us to do. At the end of *The Book of Joy* are some suggested practices that might be worth a try. Perhaps the practice of regularly saying a particular prayer, or setting aside a specific time each day for prayer, or spending ten or fifteen minutes in quiet contemplation will work for us. Perhaps, instead of getting frustrated while waiting in line at the store, we might practice reminding ourselves, as someone at our book group suggested, that we are fortunate to be able to shop for our wants and needs. Whatever practice we choose to engage in, we need to remember that "joy" is not a destination, a goal we achieve and then set aside, but a state of being that we must continually nurture. Each day, we need to re-commit ourselves to follow the example of Jesus, to learn the gentleness and humility he modeled for us, so that we may look outside ourselves and our own worries and desires to recognize and serve the needs of others. Yes, sometimes we are weary and just need to rest, but to fully experience joy, to fully experience the love of God, we have been graciously invited to yoke ourselves to the gentle and humble example of Jesus, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.