

The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy
Habakkuk 3:17-19
I Peter 1:3-9

“...even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”

“There’s just no accounting for happiness” writes poet Jane Kenyon:

or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?
You make a feast in honor of what
was lost, and take from its place the finest
garment, which you saved for an occasion
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day
to know that you were not abandoned,
that happiness saved its most extreme form
for you alone.

What is this elusive moment or emotion or meeting the poet calls happiness and Paul identifies as joy on his list of words meant to evoke a life marked by the fruit of the Spirit? Kenyon’s obvious allusion is to the parable of the prodigal, though here joy is the prodigal, the one who appears at the intersection (we talked about last week) of love and freedom, then takes off down the road, leaving us empty-handed or empty-hearted and longing in a way we would not have noticed had we not once known joy. Marked now by joy’s lack, we spend our precious lives waiting for its return. And when we grow weary of waiting, we succumb to the culture’s assurance that joy can be had for a price. But the unspoken truth of the poet and the apostle as regards joy is that we are not in control; the *joy that is joy* will one day turn up like a prodigal who comes back to the dust at our feet, an occasion we could not imagine, and that causes us to weep night and day to know that we were not abandoned, that joy saved its most extreme form for us.

What, then, is this joy? You may or may not be happy (joyful?) to know that Karl Barth has pages and pages in his *Church Dogmatics* on the subject. Giving him not much more attribution than this, let me try to translate his incredibly rich understanding of its meaning. Put simply, in the first place, joy that is joy stops us in our tracks. You are in the midst of a day that has you running from pillar to post, appointments to juggle, deadlines to meet, children to pick up, bills to pay. Suddenly, with no warning and with no intention on your part, something is so beautiful that it just kills you. Kills you in the sense of killing the purposeful person you were on your way to being because your attention has been totally arrested by something so astonishing that you actually, for one brief shining moment, forget yourself. You are awash in the awareness that you just may have been born for this moment. You say to yourself, in the immediate aftermath, “Remember this moment” so that, on the day of your dying, you can be specific as you murmur “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Joy arrests our movement in time and space, stops us in our tracks.

In the second place, joy is the simplest form of gratitude—but gratitude for what? Here I think we can so easily confuse our laudable achievements and the acquisitions that find us trying to buy or earn our way to happiness with the joy that is the fruit of the Spirit. It is the difference between patting yourself on the back at the end of the day, joyful because you have finally accomplished whatever it is that you set out to do versus the astonishment when where you finally have arrived is experienced as a gift: a child’s turn toward home? a reconciliation so real and tangible that it is almost too good to be true? an honor that leaves you bowed down and humbled? Who knew these circumstances, contrary to our expectations, would be at the end of the road and the source of so much joy? These are the moments when you say, “My God, if I died this very moment, I would die happy.” I repeat: joy is the simplest form of gratitude for something we cannot will; we can only receive.

In the third place, “Most joy is anticipatory.” There is the joy leading up to an event. Think of Christmas, of a wedding or union, a child’s birth or arrival from across the sea, a letter of acceptance, a feast with friends. But what if we lived as though every day were an event, a gift, brimming with details that, if noticed, would stop us in our tracks? If you long for joy, wake with anticipation! Live continually “in readiness for joy.” (I know, this is beginning to sound like a Hallmark Card.) Consider the hours left in this day not as “mere fact or fate, let alone an imposed misfortune”, but as a gift that invites us continually to rejoice in anticipation of something. “But this ‘something’” says Barth, and here I can only quote:

means the moments in which [your] life manifests itself to [you] as God’s gift of grace..., in which gratitude that [you] may live breaks through all of your running and striving and fighting and struggling. In respect for life, [you are] necessarily confident that there will be such moments. [You are] prepared and ready for the arrival of such moments and therefore for joy. [You are] ready, then, not merely to hurry on with [your] own work, but to pause in gratitude for what life really is as the gift of God before and after and over all [your] own works.

We are free, of course, given our cock-eyed definition of freedom, to live otherwise. We are free, when the prodigal-that-is-joy takes off down the road, to wipe our hands of expectation and settle down to the serious business of duty and diligence, thinking we deserved better and bitterly bemoaning our joyless lot. It is, as we say of others from a distance, a distance we are seldom given from ourselves, “a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Though here, in the fourth place, is the paradox: though we may live in anticipation or refusal, the joy that is joy is beyond our grasp. We stand, says Barth, “before the dangerous cliff of every willed joy.” I think it is a cliff worth lingering on for a moment this morning with the help of the apostle Paul. When he lists (and not exhaustively) the desires of the flesh which are actions characterized by our will to grasp and possess, to use and objectify the other, he speaks of “works” of the flesh. We actively will to do these things with a desired end in mind, the end usually being the acquisition of something we want for ourselves. C. S. Lewis says it well when he says that pleasure as opposed to joy is often within our power. Even if we think the end is joy (take the first thing on Paul’s list of works of the flesh which is, of course, fornication ☺), usually the joy is still-born or miscarried because we have worked to achieve something for ourselves that can only be experienced as a gift.

But when Paul speaks of love and all the words that are synonyms for love including joy, he speaks of the fruit of the Spirit. It is a gift and, as it goes with us in relation to the gifts of the Spirit, so it goes between you and me: we can have joy only as we give joy to another. In the fifth place, then, joy is “a social matter.” Now and again we can be happy all by ourselves—especially when in the state of Maine—except that if one wakes in anticipation of joy and spends the day in communion with the water and crisp airs and tall pines and delicious tastes and a dear dog, I am not so sure that is alone.

Though here is the rub with joy as a social matter: what gives me joy may not be what gives you joy. So when it comes to the joy that is joy, if I am to be the bearer of joy to you, I must ask after or seek to discern the joy that is not mine but yours, must enter into your joy and seek to effect it as a gift that is inconceivable without knowing you from the inside-out. The double grace ends up being the much greater measure of joy I receive as I let go of my expectations in favor of meeting yours. The social aspect of joy!

Then in the sixth place there is the element of surprise. As the Spirit blows where it will, making us uncertain where it has come from or where it is going, so joy is given often in the least likely places and times. When I think of people marked by joy, I think of people who have an extraordinary gift for paying attention. They may walk as I walk to get from here to there, but in the end they say, “I am sorry to be a little bit late, but did you notice that field of little blue wildflowers?” *Because I was late*, of course, I did not. I was in a hurry. How do we cultivate “a readiness for the small and smallest joys” which, if not noticed, “are great predictors that we will also miss the great and highest joys?” I think by savoring the first bite or sip of anything, rolling it around in my mouth, paying attention to the complexity that is the beginning and end of a taste; I think by looking—sometimes I have looked for hours—at a painting or a fresco that gives up the meaning of a brushstroke only to those who linger purposelessly; of course I think by seeing, really seeing the things of this earth—read poets like Mary Oliver or Jane Kenyon or Gerard Manley Hopkins who will tutor you in paying attention to the little blue flowers in the field; and I think by embracing the joy that awaits us in one another, in the surprising details missed if we only make use of each other.

But to be open in this way to each moment is to be vulnerable; so unlike a Hallmark card and in the seventh place, as we wake in expectation, as we live “wide open...in the direction of God’s unknown and even obscure” opening of us to joy, the opening is often indistinguishable from suffering. Our capacity for joy, says Barth, “shows itself to be also a capacity for suffering, a readiness to accept, with reverence and gratitude and therefore with joy, the mystery and wonder of the life given to us by God...” How else, on the cusp of his people’s exile, could Habakkuk write these words that partake more of the poet than the prophet: *Though the fig tree does not blossom...though the produce of the olive fails...though the flock is cut off from the fold...yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.*

In the end, of course, we must admit that for all these little points, we are mostly clueless when it comes to the source of our true joy. No doubt God, who made us for the joy known only as we live in relation to the love that he is, God has tried every way imaginable to get our attention. Yet the biblical narrative is nothing if it is not a compendium of how we have gone out of our way to seek happiness in every other thing. That is why, in the fullness of time, another prodigal left his Father’s house to reveal, in the dust of a human life, the joy for which we were made. In him we behold what it is to be stopped in our tracks, to know the simplest form of gratitude for something we cannot will, to live in anticipation of the fulfillment of what is promised, to know joy only as we give ourselves away, to be astonished as we pay attention to the unrepeatable gift of our one precious life.

But we know more. For though he tutors us in time to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, in him we also glimpse the joy that is not prodigal. As the blind are made to see, the hungry fed, the outcasts taken in, the oppressed set free, time is split to reveal the eternal joy for which we were made: the joy of the Father who has prepared a feast in honor of what was lost and broken and abandoned and forgotten in time: a feast for us all who will return to the one who made us, not as dust, but as those God has destined in love from the beginning. On that day, I tell you, even God’s joy will be complete!