

“Joyfully Giving Thanks” / Colossians 1:11-20 / 17 November 2013

Well, that's an ominous way to start a letter to your faraway friends. The writer of the Epistle to the Colossians says, essentially, “You need to be prepared to endure some hard times ahead, but give thanks even during those hard times...and give thanks joyfully.” Don't just say “thank you,” but mean it. Be joyful. The command to be joyful recurs many times in the Sacred Book, and it is perhaps the highest calling of the life of faith, higher even than the command to be faithful, for who can be faithful without joy? The life of faith is not about rules. It's not about being good. No, if you can live with joy, real joy, then keeping rules and being good will follow. The life of faith is about joy.

But what is your joy? Not your happiness, not your pleasure, but the real abiding joy that remains even after happiness and pleasure have fled? What is your joy, and is it not born of hardship or sorrow—at least in part? If you were to look closely at your life's great joy, would you not discover traces of that sorrow lingering still, deep in its hidden depths and secret folds? The life of faith is joy, but joy is not tearless. Joy is hard to gain but equally hard to lose. Once you've earned the badge of joy, it remains.

In George MacDonald's fairy tale, “The Light Princess,” the king of a mythical land becomes the father to a newborn princess, but he forgets to invite his cranky sister to the child's baptism. Unfortunately, not only is the sister cranky, but she's also easily offended and a powerful witch. She shows up at the baptism and puts a curse on the newborn princess: “Light of spirit, by my charms; light of body, every part. Never weary human arms, only crush thy parents' heart.” The story is mostly about the escapades of keeping the Light Princess from blowing away; she's as light as a feather. She has to be tethered to her bedposts at night so an evening breeze won't carry her out the window. But not only is she physically light, she's also emotionally light. She has no heaviness, no depth at all. The Light Princess laughs when things are funny, and she laughs when they are not. She never sheds tears, or feels longings; she knows no doubts, or regrets, or pity. She can never become attached to another person because attachment entails risk, and she's incapable of caring. And so, she flits her merry way through life, loving no one, feeling no compassion, forever happy, but never joyful.

Well, most fairytales have a prince who risks his life for the princess, and this one is no different. As the prince is drowning, stuck in the rising tide, he begs the Light Princess to help him into the boat. She giggles and tries to tug at him, but because she has no weight, she can't lift him. It's all very funny...for her. But as the water rises and the prince's cries become more desperate, something clicks inside of her. She realizes that she's about to lose the one person who actually likes to be around her, the one person who isn't put off by all her levity. And so, the smile fades from her eyes, as she pulls at the drowning prince. She clutches, and she tugs, and in time she even sheds a tear. And in that moment of fear, that moment of gravity, the first in her life, weight comes upon her, and she pulls the prince up into the boat, where she falls on his half-drowned body and weeps. In perfect fairytale order, they get married and live happily ever after, but not in perfect happiness, for they live with the memory of that their trauma. The moral of the story is that suffering is the only thing that gives us any real substance as human beings. Suffering makes mere fleeting happiness into durable joy.

I'm not a fan of George MacDonald. I find his stuff too—well—too preachy. But this story speaks to me, for it illustrates the fact that joy is not a giddy, easy thing. It is hard-won. I do not say that all suffering is good or that it's wrong to avoid suffering. We

all avoid it insofar as we can. But I do say that the greater part of joy—real joy—contains some deep traces of suffering (or at least hardship) within itself. And so I ask again, what is your joy? And what has it cost you, for although it is priceless, it has surely cost you something? Joy is not easy to attain. It takes some of us a whole lifetime to find joy, and some never do find it; they settle early for some false imitation of it. Some settle for mere pleasure, which is short-lived, or happiness, which depends on so many variables. But the life of faith is about joy.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Colossians is not at all unique. The Bible is very frequently demanding joy of us. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!" Even the dourest books of the Hebrew Canon will occasionally command us to produce joy. At times, it seems almost unfair, like bullying kids into smiling for a family photo. It reminds me of that old song with its simple directive: "Don't Worry. Be Happy." How can anyone tell us to manufacture joy? Well, because if we weren't told to do it, we might not. Though we can't exactly manufacture it, we can find it and share it.

Every Sunday afternoon, back in Cameroon, I used to teach the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Some of you older folks probably remember memorizing it when you were young. It's a long document that goes into enormous detail about salvation, and sin, and the church, and the Ten Commandments. Truly, even if you learned the whole thing by heart, my guess is that you've forgotten almost all of it by now—all but that first, most probing question, with its beautiful answer: "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God and *enjoy* God forever." I started every one of those catechism classes with that first question, and the students would grumble and roll their eyes. "Here we go again." But the life of faith begins with joy. Joy is what it's about. Not selfish pleasure, but deep, abiding joy that spills out from our lives into a world that very much needs it. Even those old 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans who wrote the Westminster Catechism, they might put you in the stocks for disagreeing with them about theology, but even they knew that faith was supposed to be about joy. The rules of Christianity are good and necessary. We've all been children whose little minds need things to be laid out in black and white, right and wrong. But a higher goal in the life of faith is to find joy, for joy only comes through service, through taking up a cross and following the self-giving way of Jesus. Joy will cost you! But once you've found your joy, for the most part the rule-keeping takes care of itself because a joy-filled heart isn't out to hurt others.

Have you heard the story of the joy-riding nuns? A police officer stopped a car full of nuns and asked the driver why she was going so slowly. The nun was apologetic. "I'm sorry, officer, I kept seeing these signs that say 40." The officer replied, "This is US Highway 40, but that's not the speed limit. In fact, on these four-lane segments of the road, the minimum speed is forty-five miles per hour." The officer glanced into the backseat and noticed that the passengers looked very tense, gripping at their rosaries. He asked them what was the matter, and they explained that they just got off of Interstate 95.

Whenever something went wrong, or the news was bad, my dear maternal grandmother used to say, in her Clarion County accent, "Oh, joy!" It's not an expression that you hear much anymore. "Joy" becomes a byword at Christmastime, but the way we celebrate the Christmas season strikes me as a desperate, sometimes joyless bid for mere pleasure. And I think that's the real problem with joy; we don't really understand it, and so we readily settle for substitutes. You can pursue happiness your whole life long, but it won't give you joy. We see people joylessly pursuing happiness everyday, raging at the

volunteer umpire at their children's softball games, so set on winning that they drain the game of its joy. I don't know what it is about golf and bridge, but you better not get in the way of some of those players. If you're willing to settle for mere pleasure, then it's easy. It comes in microwaveable plastic wrappers. You can get pleasure from a bottle, from a buddy, from a body. There are those who believe that the quest for pleasure is the main goal of humanity, but I've rarely met a person who would not sacrifice his or her pleasure for the sake of something or someone that he or she loved. People know deep within their hearts that passion, and dedication, and love are hard things, costly things, but the only things that bring us satisfaction in the end. People crave the joy of throwing their lives and their energies into meaningful causes. Joy means sacrifice. Pain is not the opposite of joy; pain is almost always a component of joy.

Perhaps I've never told you that I think Biber is a musical genius. I can't get enough of his music. Oh, did you think I meant the Canadian pop star, Justin Bieber? No, I mean Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, the seventeenth century Austrian composer. I love those Baroque guys from the German-speaking lands. I'm not a real aficionado of classical music, but when I listen to Biber's Mystery Sonatas, it gives me a joyous feeling that the world is orderly, that somewhere there is balance and symmetry. The Mystery Sonatas are haunting violin pieces that are so complex that only an octopus can play them, and they've got that old Baroque sense of logic to them, none of this meandering that modern composers do. Biber's music helps me to believe that goodness, truth, and beauty will eventually prevail. It gives me real and healthy pleasure, but is it my joy? No. Music is surely the joy of many people in this room, but for me it's just a pleasure. My joy is words. My joy is being invited, as a pastor, to participate in people's lives at crucial junctures: baptisms, weddings, funerals, and all manner of private crossroads. My joy is being welcomed into people's homes; what other profession affords a person that pleasure—unless you're a plumber or the cable guy? My joy is measuring out life by Sundays, spending each week striving with an ancient text, struggling to put life-changing truths into convincing and relevant words. What can I say, I'm a dork; my joy is church, walking with people on their journey of faith. My joy is you.

What is your joy? Or perhaps a better way to ask the question is to say, "Where do you find your identity?" When we feel empty, it's because we're not connected to reality in the way we ought to be. We're wishing, or we're trying, or we're pretending to be someone we're not. Joy is not escape from the troubles of the world, but instead it is finding the place where you can contribute meaningfully to the mission of fixing those troubles. Joy isn't escape from reality; it's living in harmony with reality. "You're about to suffer," the letter to the Colossians says. "Big changes are coming your way, and you're going to have to endure them. Do it patiently. And give thanks joyfully." Each and every one of us has changes ahead of us, and some of them will entail suffering. Find your joy. Invest not in mere pleasures, which are short-lived, but in the costly joy of service to the needs of the world. The life of faith is about joy. Amen.