



Joy That is Out of this World

5/16/21: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

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May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard: in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

“Sunny with a side of joy”

That’s what was written on the side of the bag of chicken nuggets that I got from Chick-fil-A the other day. I have to say that I really like the chicken at Chick-fil-A. You might even say that I have a bit of joy that comes from biting into one of those nuggets.

The joy is a little complicated, however. On the one hand, I really like the chicken. I also respect the fact the Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays, in recognition of the Christian sabbath. The closure gives employees a chance to rest with the families or do whatever it is that they would like to do. It interrupts the marathon of endless consumption that we mindlessly run.

On the other hand, Chick-fil-A has been financially associated with policies and organizations that discriminate against the LGBTQ community. I’m not in favor of that. And yet, I can affirm what Pete Buttigieg said, who you may remember was the first openly gay presidential candidate and is now our Secretary of Transportation, which was, “I do not approve of their politics, but I kind of approve of their chicken. So maybe if nothing else I can build that bridge. Maybe I will become in a position to broker that peace deal.” <https://www.newsweek.com/pete-buttigieg-chick-fil-chicken-politics-lgbtq-community-peace-deal-religion-1376466>

This story shows that joy arises unexpectedly from the complicated reality of our lives. We see this in John’s Gospel. Last week, we heard Jesus say to his disciples, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15.9-11) This week, we overhear Jesus saying to God, “I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” (John 17.13) He comes so that our joy may be *complete*, or, depending on the translation, full, wholly mature, filled to the brim. What’s going on here?

Jesus speaks these words in a heartbreaking context. They come from his so-called “Farewell Discourse.” On the last night he is with them, Jesus is practicing critical pastoral care for disciples, whose hearts will break when he is executed the next day; disciples whom he knows will abandon him; among whom is a disciple he knows will betray him. And yet they are also eating and drinking and breaking bread together as deeply committed friends, an occasion also for joy. He seeks to reassure them of his and God’s—for they are one—continuing presence, always.

Later in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus compares the situation of grief that they will encounter, in a world that is shaped according to different values, with that of a mother in labor. “You will have pain, but your grief will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human



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being into the world. So, you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16.21)

And then there is John’s continuous use of the word “world.’ In Greek, the word is *kosmos*. For John’s community, this meant variously the physical world, the people of Israel as God’s chosen people, and those who opposed John’s community. The writer makes a dizzying and repetitious point that Jesus and the disciples are in the world but not of it. Jesus is praying to God that his disciples live in the world but not of it. That is to say, he prays that we remain engaged with the world, *and* not let it shape our essential identity; that we be attentive to and engaged with, its pain and sorrow, *and* not be corrupted by its values; that we keep our eyes on Jesus, *and* not to turn away from suffering and need.

The very nature of joy eludes any effort to describe it, but it is deeply different than happiness. Happiness depends on external circumstances. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “happiness turns up in the places where you’d more or less expect it—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. But joy is notoriously unpredictable, just the like the One who bequeaths it” (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, p. 47)

Within this world of pain and hurt, so often rife with conflict, riddled with competition, prone to exploit the weak and worship accumulation, joy takes root to be savored and discovered. Think of cultures with histories branded by tragedy—Black people in this country, or Jewish people in western Europe, or the Irish. And think for a moment of the astounding array of joyful music, of rich comedy, of great literature that has come from the crucible of suffering that has brought joy to untold numbers. Even in our own experience, there are people we know who have terribly hard lives, but who also live lives of joy and laughter that can only come from another place.

I believe this joy of the Lord is available during times of depression, of chronic illness, in the wake of the death of a loved one or of a relationship, amidst war, famine, oppression. Where something as simple as a beautiful flower, the tang of an orange, the soaring voice of a choir, the aroma from the top of a newborn baby’s head, a hug from a dear friend, the miracle of racial reconciliation, the balm of a kind word or a helping hand—these are points of joy. It’s how God reaches out to us in unexpected moments through the gift of awareness. Joy is like a personal love note from God, saying: “I love you. This moment is here for you to enjoy, whatever you are facing. There is hope for you.”

Joy expands our lungs and gives us room to breathe. Joy is accompanied by gratitude and longing and is followed by the desire to serve. It is a gift that is ever present, and though it is totally beyond our control, Jesus promises to make this joy fill us up, when we open our hearts to one another and to all creation with the awareness that he gives us by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is joy that is out of this world. As the Psalmist says, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30.5)

Amen.