

Joy and Sadness

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41

Rev. Erica Avena

April 26, 2020

Prayer: *O God, our eyes do not always focus on Christ among us, and our ears cannot clearly discern your voice among the babble in our lives; we come to your Word for renewed inspiration. Purify the desires of our hearts, that we may seek your salvation. Help us to truly love one another, and the loveless, and respond with joyful and generous hearts. Amen.*

What is bringing you sadness right now? What is bringing you joy? In this time of pandemic our community, state, nation and entire world is grieving or dealing with anticipatory grief... which is a little trickier. Many of us wonder how life will look on the other side of this pandemic, the people and the things we valued about our way of life that will be lost?

In 2015 Disney came out with the movie called "Inside Out", which is a great family movie if you are looking for something to watch. It is particularly good for tweens and teens who are waking up to their emotions, an age when our emotions can feel especially out of control. The emotions of one girl are animated as individual characters, (anger, fear, disgust, surprise) and the plot line of the movie follows their interaction. The relationship between the characters *Joy* and *Sadness* is particularly important. At the beginning of the movie, *Sadness*, the character, isn't even there, and then when she is introduced, none of the other emotions like *Sadness*. She is a real drag; you want her to go away. She is so depressing – don't bring sadness in here. But *Joy*, who steers this ship, won't let her go. *Joy* drags sadness through the brain, trying to figure out a way out of their problems. The big point in the end is that *Sadness* was the key to the girl's well-being all along.

Without *Sadness* remembering what really happened, without *Sadness* bearing witness to what everyone else wanted to put out of their mind, there could be no real harmony or resolution. *Joy* needs *Sadness*, to stay grounded, to keep it real, for the fullness and genuine joy of life. And *Sadness* needs *Joy* to get her up and moving and to bring some resolution. They need each other. Even though they'd like to forget each other a good bit of the time.

My daughter Sydney acted this out with her friend Miya. In Sydney's birthday card, Miya (who is being dragged along in the photo on this link) says: "thank you for being the joy to my sadness."

Sadness holds the key to the real challenges, the actual problems, what our real feelings are, and what we genuinely care about. If you consider your own sadness, the inner sadness, you will know what the real challenges are for you – you'll know what isn't resolved, what you still need to work on. And what you may be dragging along behind you. You'll also know from what ground could spring real, lasting, meaningful joy for you personally.

In this time of pandemic, many of us are living in a moment when we are anticipating grief, which is reasonable given the pandemic, but also very hard. If you're happy, you might be feeling guilty, if you're sad you also might be feeling guilty.

It is a long way to move from sadness to joy. It is easier to say than to do. I'd like to invite you to reconsider with me the way that faith holds can hold them together in a meaningful way.

Christians have always grounded our deep joy, in the death and then resurrection of our redeemer and savior, Jesus Christ. His life is offered as a gift, laid down for his friends. Although he suffered and died, he also rose again, and invites us to a joyful life.

There's all this time between Jesus' ministry, and the time when the disciples finally take it on the road themselves and share the good news beyond their own corner of the world. It doesn't seem clear to them for a long time, a surprisingly long period of time, that their lives should be different if they will continue to be his disciples. After he died, they were back in Jerusalem, eating Kosher Chicken dinners; it's what they knew, like nothing was supposed to change. Now it's so obvious to us, in hindsight, that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, that the Apostle Paul would bring the good news to the gentiles, and that Christianity would be shaped by the missions to the non-Jews, people just like us. But it wasn't at all clear to them, at the time, that there would be a joyful future to the horrific events they had witnessed in Jerusalem.

Willie Jennings, who is an African American theologian and writer, says that "Joy is an act of resistance to the forces of despair." ...Dr. Jennings explains that joy makes "productive use of pain and suffering and the absurd." While not taking any of the suffering lightly, it's not taking the pain and suffering too seriously, making them gods. Joy is the work of people together, not work done in isolation – which lifts up the importance in this time of separation to stay connected to people who are important to you, who can bring joy to your sadness. Cultivate routines that bring you joy.

Dr. Jennings also noted that in the West joy is not fully the people's work (as it should be); it's marketed to us commercially, which always falls short. A new coffee pot will only bring joy for a moment. The human spirit flourishes under the creative work of enjoyment and pleasure – how to have a good time with nothing."

You can hear it in the African-American spirituals, composed and sung in slavery, focused on a future which holds joy.

- We Shall Overcome
- Bound for Canaan Land
- Hold On
- Freedom
- Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me, was originally sung by slaves who were shackled together, as a way of keeping a steady beat to walk in time to – so as not to reinjure one another as they moved. You can just imagine Jesus in chains, walking with them. The rhythm of sadness shared among them, easier to bear if they bear it together. This is how and where you find joy. It's a joyful song, born in suffering.

John 15:11 says: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Jesus has told them he will die, and that his spirit will remain. It's not a joyful moment – but he is pointing the way for joy to come.

In this pandemic season many of us have been rediscovering simple pleasures. Conversations at a safe distance with neighbors, the beauty of spring, a simple family game night virtual or with your household, children's chalk drawings outside on the sidewalk, time to reflect, to be grateful for what we have. Many of us are also trying new things, reimagining, innovating, experimenting.

For those who are working in health care, all the more, the opportunity to offer skills where they are needed, to work in concert with the Great Physician. For those who are sick a time apart for healing.

Today, I encourage you to seek joy to your sadness. The joy of Christ's love, presence, and faithfulness. The spirit of Christ is not quarantined as we are, the Holy Spirit can bring hope even now, in all circumstances.

The scripture promises, this blessing is for you and for your children, and for those far away.

Rev. Erica Avena 04.26.2020

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107