

TEXT: John 15:11
THEME: Love is fulfilled in joy
SUBJECT: Joy
TITLE: Joy

Sixth Sunday of Easter
09 May 2021
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Jesus said, “You become my friends by abiding in love. I have told you this *so that* my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” Another translation has “. . .*so that* my joy may be in you and your joy may be made full.” Love is made complete in joy; joy shared is the fulfillment of love.

It is hard to talk about joy, says Frederick Buechner, for the almost superstitious reason that you might take the bloom off it, you’ll threaten it, you fear it will come to an end when the demons come and gobble it up. But almost in spite of ourselves we get glimpses of joy, and maybe glimpses is all we can ever have of joy.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies

Emily Dickinson

In talk of joy, the snow leopard of emotions, success in circuit lies. Poetry strengthens the intuitive trust, tolerance for paradox, and general spiritual fluency required to tell of joy slant.

She’s slicing ripe white peaches
into the Tony the Tiger bowl
and dropping slivers for the dog
poised vibrating by her foot to stop their fall
when she spots it, camouflaged,
a glimmer and then full on—
happiness, plashing blunt soft wings
inside her as if it wants
to escape again.

Sarah Lindsay

Sarah Lindsay’s awareness of being happy is occasioned by what is near, ordinary: a small moth (plashing blunt soft wings). It is as if, says Christian Wiman, the moth has entered from another element, or has momentarily transformed the element into which it has come, where everything is so slow and singularly itself it seems to be suspended in water.

What is the relationship between happiness and joy? Joy is an emotion that always has an element of being *seized*. Joy always involves some loss of self. Sometimes joy can be an intensification of happiness. Joy is like a flash of eternity that illuminates the present moment, that enables, Wiman believes, Sarah to see her happiness.

Joy is not, however, dependent on things going our way. Maria Hummel describes a moment of tender but terrifying intimacy with her chronically sick son. They travel by train from their home to the hospital. On the way they pass through Burlingame, a city on the San Francisco Peninsula with a significant shore line on San Francisco Bay.

Burlingame is the site of joy:
a race past bakeries, gold rings
in open black cases. I don't care
who sees my crooked smile
or what erases it, past the bakery,
when you tire. We ride the blades again
beside the crooked bay. You smile.
I hold you like a hole holds light.

We wear our hats and ride the knives.
They cannot fix you. They try and try.
Tunnel! Into the dark open we go.
Days you are sick we get dressed slow.

The keenest shock in this sobering poem is the presence of that one word "joy." There is no happiness in this poem, but in the strong charge between mother and son, in the provisional haven their love makes of danger ("We wear our hats and ride the knives"), there is joy that is entirely credible and genuinely consoling. And maybe even redemptive? Who cries out that word *Tunnel*? The mother? The boy?

It almost seems an utterance of Love itself, which opens the darkness into which they are headed, or makes them, faced with such terrible darkness, open to whatever saving grace might be there, and only there. *Into the dark open we go.*

A moment of joy is, or at least leads to, a moment of comprehension. In joy
Space opens and from the heart of matter
sheds a descending grace that makes
for a moment, that naked thing, Being,
a thing to understand. Norman MacCaig

The assumption is that Being is a thing to be understood. Life is not absurd, a cruel joke, but a story whose plot is written by grace. What if joy reveals the really real?

In June's high light she stood at the sink
With a glass of wine,
And listened for the bobolink,
And crushed garlic in late sunshine.

I watched her cooking, from my chair.
She pressed her lips
Together, reached for kitchenware,
And tasted sauce from her fingertips.

"It's ready now. Come on," she said.
"You light the candle."
We ate, and talked, and went to bed.
And slept. It was a miracle.

Donald Hall

It was a miracle! Joy reveals the really real in the daily details that often go, in the moment, unnoticed. Frequently, for many of us, as for this poet who writes after the death of his wife, the revelation comes only in the recollection of the experience?

These moments of joy that reveal the miracle life is, also create a longing for more. It is a homesickness for a home we were not aware of having.

Joy's trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy. Richard Wilbur

If joy is love made complete, compassion is the other side of a living joy. Joy motivates us to revolt against the destruction of life and against those who destroy life. Grief over life that is destroyed is nothing other than an ardent longing for life's liberation to happiness and joy. Otherwise we would accept innocent suffering and destroyed life as our fate and destiny. Joy is a radical act of protest in the name of God against suffering and those who cause it.

Joy is that something in the soul that makes it possible to claim again the word "soul." Joy, more exalting than happiness, less graspable than hope. Joy, that seed of being which can bud even in our frozen hearts, so that faith suddenly is not something we need contemplate, struggle for, or even "have," but is simply there, as the world is there. There is no way to plan for, much less conjure, such an experience. We can only try to make ourselves fit to feel the moment when it comes, and let it carry us where it will.

How do we make ourselves fit? By abiding in love.

To be blessed
said the old woman
is to live and work
so hard
God's love
washes right through you
like milk through a cow Alicia Suskin Ostricker

(This sermon is indebted to the work of Christian Wiman.)