

*The Warmth of Joy*  
Sunday, February 10, 2019

“Your job is to stand in the circle of sadness,” Joy tells Sadness as the emotions who guide 11-year old Riley prepare her for her first day in a new school in the movie *Inside Out*. Joy, who acts as the chief of the emotions, enlists the others, Anger, Fear, and Disgust, to do real jobs to give Riley a good first day, but as far as Joy can see, Sadness only turns everything blue, literally and figuratively.

When Sadness leaves her circle and touches one of Riley’s core memories – a memory of her teammates lifting her up and cheering for her after a hockey game – Joy – as far as she is able – becomes furious because the memory which had been purely joyfully golden is now tinged with blue. Joy’s anger sets off events which expel her and Sadness from the Headquarters where they govern Riley’s emotions and out into Riley’s mind. To get back, they travel through the regions of Riley’s long term memories, her imagination, dreams, and subconscious, and even into the region where memories fizz away, forgotten. In that region, as Joy worries that the memory of the hockey game will be forgotten along with other memories she carries, she looks again at that memory. Yes, the memory ended with the joy of the support and praise of Riley’s teammates, but it came about only because Riley failed to score the winning goal. Riley felt she had let down her team and went off by herself to be sad. Her parents came to her and hugged her and then her team followed, embracing her and lifting her up, again literally and figuratively. Joy suddenly sees that her joyful moment of love and connection only came about because Riley was able to feel and acknowledge the sadness she felt. If she had gone off angry or acted like everything was fine – as Joy would always recommend – her family and her friends would never have reached out to her in love. While losing the game wasn’t good in itself, reacting to it honestly created a core memory which was good.

When Joy and Sadness at last return to Headquarters, Joy realizes that Sadness must guide Riley out of the problems she has gotten into in their absence. And then Joy and Sadness go on to guide Riley together.

Chuck and I first saw *Inside Out* with Oliver and Miles when it came out, and liked it then. We watched it again – without the boys – on Friday night as I was thinking about this sermon, and liked it even better the second time when we focused on the plot. Whether you have children to watch it with or not, I recommend it. It does a good job of reframing our society’s emphasis on always looking on the bright side. Riley’s parents, for instance, each tell her how much they need her to be their “happy girl” - with Joy guiding her she smiles in return as

she represses her grief. Later, with Sadness guiding her, she is able to tell them how hard that expectation was for her and how it made her feel that she couldn't share her feelings with them. After the movie came out, many psychologists wrote about how important that message is to hear and for parents and other adults to share with children – it's okay to be sad – in fact it's more than okay – it's good.

But still our society tells us to suppress sadness and get over grief – making the widow feel she should be back in the swing of things within a month, telling the cancer patient how brave and inspiring he is, assuring the couple dealing with infertility issues to relax or that they can always adopt, responding “All Lives Matter” to those who want it heard after all their sufferings that “Black Lives Matter.” How have you been shut out of your own sadness? What difference might it have made if you had felt welcome to feel your grief and even share it? What difference has it made when your sadness has been acknowledged, accepted, and even honored?

The prayer shawls we have blessed today are one way this congregation tries to acknowledge sad times. Though they are also given out in times we think of as joyful – when our young adults leave home for college or their first job, for a marriage, a birth, or a move – these are all times of major transition – times of joy which also often include a sense of loss or anxiety. Wrapping one another in prayer shawls at these times is a way we say you aren't alone. As Riley's teammates held her up, so we are holding you, and we hope that like Riley you may be warmed by joy in your time of sorrow. As a sign of that now, I invite you to wrap yourself symbolically in our collective warmth. If you have brought a prayer shawl, please wrap yourself in it. But since some of us don't have prayer shawls, I'd also ask you if anyone near you doesn't have one, consider sharing – extending your shawl across shoulders or knees, so that we share the warmth of one large patchwork prayer shawl.

Now that you embody joy and sorrow united, think with me for a minute about why our society has such a hard time allowing those two emotions to sit together. Why do we see sorrow as something to put behind us to get to the goal - joy? Not every culture sees these two in opposition – a Buddhist story tells of a man walking through a wilderness who comes upon a tiger. The tiger chases him. The man runs until he comes to the edge of a cliff. Desperate to save himself, he climbs down a vine and dangles over the precipice. He looks down and sees another tiger below him. As he hangs there between the two tigers, two mice come out of a hole in the cliff and begin gnawing on the vine. Suddenly, he notices on the vine a plump

wild strawberry. He picks it and eats it. And the story ends, “The strawberry was delicious!”

There are many interpretations of this story and what it teaches about the Buddhist understanding of impermanence, but one thing it doesn't say is that sorrow and joy cannot exist together. The strawberry and the tigers are both realities for the man in the same moment. The story doesn't advise waiting until he has escaped the danger of the tigers to eat the strawberry, or tell him not to pick the strawberry while he is in danger. And the danger from the tigers and the gnawed vine doesn't diminish his enjoyment of the delicious strawberry. Joy and sorrow exist together.

But that's not usually how we in the west see things, and I wonder if our focus on the primacy of joy has to do with the myth of the Garden of Eden. That story says that there was a state of being for humankind when all was joy, when there was no pain, or suffering, or death. Then Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their punishment was to be expelled from the Garden into a world of pain, suffering, and death. And though we don't believe that story as literally true, I think its duality has permeated our history and our culture so much that it's hard to remove its framework. Think of Joni Mitchell's song *Woodstock* – it celebrates that three day gathering of peace and music, of people coming together and living and singing in harmony. Yet the chorus takes us beyond that event:

*We are stardust  
Billion year old carbon  
We are golden  
Caught in the devil's bargain  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden*

The joy and hope of the event itself isn't enough. It will never be enough until we get back to the Garden, out of the suffering brought upon us by Adam and Eve's falling for the devil-as-snake's temptation to eat the apple.

Even *Inside Out* which tries to show the value of Sadness, shows Joy as the first emotion, born with the child, and the other emotions arising later.

But not all traditions take that perspective. Hindu traditions see everything as a manifestation of Brahman, so nothing is only good or bad; Brahman encompasses everything including pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are part of the natural order of the world. They didn't come about because of sin; they

weren't caused by evil; they just are. They don't indicate there is something wrong with us or that we are somehow at fault when we experience suffering. There is no guilt – only the choice of how we will deal with it. And joy runs through it all.

How would it change how we understand ourselves and one another, how we understand our world, if things weren't divided into good and bad, before and after, reward and punishment, but just all that is with joy suffusing everything? How would it feel if we knew ourselves always wrapped in the warmth of this joy? How can we spread that warmth so that others know themselves also wrapped in joy whatever storms they may walk through?

- Pamela M. Barz