

This Delight-Filled Universe
Sunday, February 3, 2019

You probably don't remember, but last spring in my annual report sermon, I suggested that we focus this year on joy - not slacking off and doing only what seems fun – for fun doesn't necessarily lead to joy – but focusing on areas of ministry which bring us deep gladness. I don't know if it's been conscious, but I have noticed that our ministries have expanded in areas of deep gladness: more of you are involved in planning our worship services and for this new series on joy, your ideas brought us today's bubble machine, wrapping ourselves in comfort shawls next Sunday, and engaging in the creativity of joy on February 17. Members of the congregation are now visiting other members of our community at home and in nursing homes, with all of them now receiving more of the joy of connection, and as always we have people engaged in the joy of teaching and learning with our children and youth, working with their hands on the building and on crafts and projects, and in the joy of engaging with other people in adult education programs, at coffeeshours, potluck suppers, and Unity. So joy is definitely a part of our ministry – if it weren't, why would all the people whose anniversaries we just celebrated have stayed here for 50 years or for 5? Why would any of us be here? For isn't religion about joy?

Of course that's an ingenuous question – we can all think of a plethora of examples where religion has been and currently is about anything but joy. Think of our ancestors, the Pilgrims and the Puritans. They knew the joy of being saved – you had to have experienced that joy and certainty to become a member of the church – but their religion was more about fear – the fear of not being among the saved, the fear of having your loved ones not being among the saved, the fear of the Lord. Today still too much religion is rooted in fear – fear of loss, fear of punishment, fear of difference. But at their hearts, all religions, including Christianity, are about joy, not fear.

According to the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha instructed his followers to:

*Live in joy, in love,
even among those who hate.*
*Live in joy, in health,
even among the afflicted.*
*Live in joy, in peace,
even among the troubled.*
Look within. Be still.

*Free from fear and attachment,
know the sweet joy of the way.*

The Prophet Muhammed instructed his followers: *Make things easy for people and not difficult. Give people good news and bring them joy, and do not turn them away.* In the Gospel of John, after several chapters of instructions, Jesus tells his followers: *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* The ancient Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, *Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.*

And in Hinduism, the goal of religious practice is union with Brahman, the ultimate reality underlying all that is, and Brahman is described as Ananda or “pure joy”. So though it may seem frivolous to focus on joy with all that is happening in the world, the great religions tell us that only by focusing on joy – joy for all people – will we be able to move towards the societies we desire.

Now, as I say whenever the topic comes up, joy is different from happiness. Happiness is circumstantial. It’s hard to be happy if you’re not healthy, or safe, or have at least a minimum of shelter, food, and love. But joy is different – joy can well up in the harshest situations as a flower in the cracks of a sidewalk – which itself can inspire joy! In a famous passage in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl tells the story of a young woman in a German concentration camp: He wrote,

It is a simple story. There is little to tell and it may sound as if I had invented it; but to me it seems like a poem. This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here-I am here-I am life, eternal life.'"

She found not happiness, but joy.

Joy is not of our own creating nor can it come when called. Joy bursts on us when we do not expect it – in response to a chord of music, the sight of a soaring

bird, connecting to another's heart. Unlike happiness which comes from an awareness of ourselves and our surroundings, in joy we lose the boundary of self and merge with the music, the bird and the sky, the snow-lit world, the other person. In joy we become one with the universe. We are joy in those moments.

And though those moments are beyond our control, much of religious practice is designed to open ourselves to receive joy when it comes. Meditation and prayer lead to union with the divine – or joy. Service to others opens us to those moments of self-less connection with another or a larger cause – joy. Yoga, tai chi, sacred dance – all practices to lose ourselves in the flow of the body and become one with joy. In these all these practices, over time we clear away anger, shame, and irritation, freeing inner space for joy to fill.

But our surroundings can also open us to joy. Music, scent, color, space. Especially in nature those moments of joy seem to come to us – in the dappled sunlight of a forest, mesmerized by the continually rolling waves, the prism of branches encased in ice, raindrops sparkling on the grass, the arc of a rainbow – all help us to lose our distracted selves and find our wholeness in joy. Making time in our days to put ourselves in nature can help us receive these moments of joy. And our interior surroundings can open us to joy as well. The designer Ingrid Fetell Lee spent years looking at common characteristics of joyful moments and found that round shapes, abundance, bright colors, light, sparkle, symmetry, and a sense of freedom and openness are likely to be part of a moment of joy. She theorizes that these signaled safety to our earliest ancestors. So we've tried to incorporate those elements into our sanctuary for this series – the fairy lights, the sparkly joy sign, the spring tulips, and for today – bubbles and party hats – next Sunday the varied colors and textures of prayer shawls. What helps open you to joy? How can you incorporate those practices, elements, and attitudes into your life? How can your spaces incorporate visual elements which open you to joy? How can we make our building visually inside and out reflect even better the joy which we find here? How can joy become even more the center of our lives at First Parish and in our daily lives? How can its sparkle here radiate out into the world? For the search for joy is not frivolous. At its heart is fullness of life for all people.

As the Radiance Sutras invite:

*The senses declare an outrageous world--
sounds and scents, ravishing colors and shapes,
ever-changing skies, iridescent reflections--
all these beautiful surfaces
decorating vibrant emptiness.*

*The god of love is courting you,
light as a feather.*

*Every perception is an invitation into revelation.
Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching--
ways of knowing creation,
transmissions of electric realization.
The deepest reality is always right here.*

*Encircled by splendor, in the center of the sphere,
meditate where the body thrills
to currents of intimate communion.
Follow your senses to the end and beyond
into the heart of space."*

- Pamela M. Barz