

The Wisdom of Joy, the Joy of Wisdom”
March 12, 2023

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20
Hebrews 12:1-2

During the Bible study last Wednesday evening, we were discussing chapter five of Ecclesiastes, in particular a few short sentences that come a little before the lesson we heard this morning. They involve money, which was kind of big deal in the time that Ecclesiastes was written—sometime around the fourth century BC. Currency had been standardized, which helped with gathering taxes and trade between nations. Payment with coins rather than goods became expected in transactions. People wanted money.

The effect of this new development on those people? Ecclesiastes puts it bluntly: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity”—emptiness.

So it was and so it has been and so it is.

One person in the study recalled John D. Rockefeller’s answer when ask how much money is enough. “More,” he said. That seems to be what Mr. Gates or Mr. Musk would say as well.

I recalled a study that suggested people could be satisfied with money if they had 20% more. What do you think? Maybe so. Maybe so.

The next morning, by coincidence, I read of a new study that claims money could indeed buy happiness. 200 people, with a wide range of incomes, were each given \$10,000 and told that they had to spend it all in three months. They wrote about their level of happiness each month. And, that’s right, those people seemed to be happier than a control group of 100 people who didn’t get the money. Apparently, the lower your income, the more happiness people got from that extra cash.

There was one downside, however. Those with an annual income over \$123,000 didn’t seem to derive any extra happiness. Unfortunately, some of you might have maxed out on your happiness.

“Happiness,” Frederick Buechner says, “comes and goes with the moments that occasion it.” Probably so, as that study suggests. “But,” Buechner adds, “*joy* that is always there is like an underground spring no matter how dark and terrible the night.”ⁱ

In contrast to the fleeting happiness that we seek and sometime know and often lose, this morning we heard of the enduring wisdom of joy: “This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drinking and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun.” Eating, drinking, and enjoying one’s work—what one Old Testament scholar calls “the three gifts of joy, a trinity of delight.”ⁱⁱ

How wise are you?

Are your receiving and using those gifts?

Are you open to the delight that is given to each of us and all of us?

The wisdom of joy is this—it is there for us at all times to receive as a gift from God.

Buechner tells us that we can never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that we are never really responsible for them. The unspeakable joy *sometimes* of just being alive. The miracle *sometimes* of being just who we are with the blue sky and the green grass, the faces of our friends and the waves of the ocean, being just what they are. The joy of release, of being suddenly well when before we were sick, of being forgiven when before we were ashamed and afraid, of finding ourselves loved when we were lost and alone.ⁱⁱⁱ

The wisdom of joy is this—it is there for us at all times to call on for strength when happiness has faded and the road ahead is challenging—or unknown.

Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes recalls growing up in the Black church, where she often heard “This joy I have; the world didn’t give it, and the world can’t take it away.”

That’s the thing about joy—*real* joy, isn’t it? The world didn’t give it, so the world can’t take it away. It is an enduring gift of God.

The wisdom of joy is this—it is there for us at all times to find in those simple events of daily life: eating, drinking, working. In food familiar and comforting or new and surprising; in early-morning coffee, in a glass of decent wine or a beer with friends, in water after exercise; in the daily rhythms and unexpected demands and the affirming successes and the discouraging failures of work—there is deep joy to be found, deep joy that abides and sustains.

We think of Lent as a somber time, an ashen, gray time. But the wisdom of joy invites us to look again, to see something new in the midst of mortality and suffering.

Yes, death lurks in the words we hear this morning, the way that death lurks through all of Ecclesiastes—and through all of our lives. In our joy we are reminded of “the few days of the life God gives us.” But when we face our mortality in this season of Lent, we sense that, as one person put it: “Like darkness enhancing the weak radiance of a candle, death serves to *highlight*, rather than extinguish,” the reality of joy.^{iv}

Joy!

Cudjoe-Wilkes says: “As a New York City pastor, I have been close to such widespread sorrow and grief that they have made joy seem like a luxury, not a right.” Reflecting on life in recent years, she reminds us that “Black Americans are *three times more likely* to die of Covid than white Americans,” adding, “My heart broke as I saw the economic and residential insecurity that the pandemic exposed. . . . On top of that, fatal encounters with police or just everyday citizens made Black people’s names into viral hashtags.”

Through all of this, she discovered that “the most powerful response to Black death is Black joy—a kind of resilience that refuses to be dictated to despite the horrific conditions it is forced to transcend.”^v

Such a joy, it seems, is informed by an ancient wisdom, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, yes, and also the wisdom of Jesus. One early Christian speculated that Jesus was able to endure the great

shame and the great pain of the cross because he was able to see beyond them an even greater joy.

In the face of emptiness and death, we hear the Wisdom of joy—joy that helps us endure and continue and turn from nihilism that sees only vanity and emptiness so that we can seek the good and live fully in the days we have.

We know well enough that we don't take care of ourselves, that we can't use our own ingenuity, or thoughtfulness, or scientific skills, or creativity to solve the problems that beset us. We confess that we're not strong enough or tough enough or stoic enough to bear up under whatever weighs us down and not complain. In other words, "We can't do this on our own."

And yet, we have the suspicion that joy shows up in just such circumstances, meeting us in the broken places, crying with us, and raising us up. Indeed, joy is something like resurrection, bringing new life where none was expected.

We saw something like joy recently when we watched as people were pulled alive from the wreckage of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Rescuers searched desperately and dug cautiously, with looks of anguish, fearing the worst. And when—beyond all that we might allow ourselves to hope—someone was found, we saw something of relief, something of thanksgiving, something of *joy* over a life saved, a life given back.

And that, in a sense is the story of each of us, all of us—pulled from the wreckage in which we find ourselves, helpless. It is joy, what has been called "an undeserved and unexpected outcome which confirms the goodness of God."^{vi}

We can't avoid the hard parts in our own lives or in the world. Illness must be walked through in all its pain and uncertainty and treatment and healing day by day. The sorrow of grief is with us when we wake each morning. The anxiety about tomorrow keeps us awake in the night. And we know quite well that we will not suddenly arrive on the pleasant shore of racial harmony, interfaith understanding, or international peace. The perilous journeys to such lands are long and needing our best efforts each day.

But here we are: among those who look to Jesus and seek to follow in the way of the One who endured the cross. Here we are: among those who at times are saved *from* greed, hatred, and confusion and are being saved *for* kindness and creativity, wisdom and compassion.

This is why we are able to run with perseverance the race that is set before us—as exhausting as it seems at times. This is why we can speak of joy even in the midst of suffering and death, especially in the midst of suffering and death.

What joy we have.

We have one another in this this congregation—and that is our glorious advantage. Ask anyone who has been through a difficult time and they will tell you that they made it through in part because of the other members here—people whom you are sitting next to, maybe even you yourself. We not only bear one another's burdens and share one another's sorrows. We remind one another of the sustaining joy that carries us.

We also have the presence of God, the One who in Jesus Christ suffers with us. This is not an unmoved, impassible god, but the One who responds to human pain. God enters into the very heart of our brokenness. In Jesus God takes on human suffering, bearing it fully. That is our wholeness, our well-being, our *joy*.

We are often broken.

Even Jesus was broken and died. And we will hear more of that in the weeks ahead.

Brokenness and death, however, are not the end of the story.

There is a joy that is set before us. There is a joy that is ours each day as we follow in the way of the crucified and risen Christ.

ⁱ F. Buechner in *The Magnificent Defeat*

ⁱⁱ William Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation Commentary.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/10/28/touched-with-joy>

^{iv} William Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation Commentary, pg. 62.

^v Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes, "Taking a Lesson from the Seed—Find Joy." Jul 21, 2020.

^{vi} Peter Gomes