

Homily – We Are To Rejoice

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Happiness.
Pleasure.
Gladness.
Delight.
Elation.
Cheer.
Jubilation.
Euphoria.
Delirium.
Ecstasy.
Rapture.
Exuberance.
Exultation.
Glory.
Triumph.
Celebration.
Revelry.
Merrymaking.
Festivity.

And, feasting. These are all synonyms for the word “rejoice.”

Today we wear red, and we celebrate the high holy day or Feast of Pentecost. We exult in the Holy Spirit of God. We revel in the connection we have with God others and self. We rejoice in the breath of God that has been created within each and every one of us.

Before the beginning of time and space, the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. The Christ was in all, and through all, and around all. And, the Spirit of God was there too, connecting all.

And with the creation of the universe Christ is across all of time and space and the Spirit continues to connect all.

And, with our creation we were given the breath of life and eventually consciousness.

As we breath in and then breath out we have the Spirit of God sustaining us and giving us life and consciousness.

Again, each of us has the Christ within and around us, and each of us is connected to God, others, and self by the Holy Spirit.

And, as we have been reminding ourselves over the last two months, it is this Holy Spirit that connects us over the ether. During our internet worship we are connected to one another. It is not just this connection we have with the camera and microphone. It is not just the comments that have been typed in to the comment section of Facebook Live. We are connected in worship by the Holy Spirit to God, and we are connected to one another.

Take a moment to imagine in your mind's eye, some of the others whom you are connected to in worship. Maybe it is the person you would sit behind when you were here in this space in person. Maybe it is a family member. If you are new to our worship at St. Barnabas and have never been on our campus, then know that through the Holy Spirit you are connected to us even if we can't picture your face, yet.

Through the Holy Spirit we are connected to one another, and we are connected back to God. We were made to be in connection. Even when we are in our separate homes we are connected to one another and to God. Again, it is the Holy Spirit that gives us life, gives us consciousness, and gives us connection. Glory in these connections. Celebrate the Holy Spirit. Rejoice in the wonderful way God has made you.

You know God has also made us to live in a state of joy. Joy is a reflection of our true nature. Joy is the pure, sacred spirit found in each one of us. And, by connecting to the joy in ourselves we find the joy in everyone else too. Joy is a way of being.

Now, living with joy does not mean we are happy all the time. In general, joyful people have a changing level of happiness that rises and falls over time.

In addition, to be joyful does not mean we ignore the suffering in the world. We saw more suffering this past week, especially in the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, St. Paul and the subsequent outpouring of grief and violence. We can not ignore the pain.

And, having joy does not mean that we avoid responsibility for alleviating as much suffering as we can. As followers of Jesus, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, we must confront sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism in all of its forms, especially when it is our own backyard and family. Joy is not an excuse to avoid personal responsibility.

Instead, what I am calling joy is a general feeling of aliveness and well-being that is characterized by meeting the ups and downs of life with authenticity and perspective.

Have you ever noticed that a single bad experience with a dog stands out more vividly than a thousand good ones. In other words, our memories are like Velcro and Teflon. Negative experiences stick to the brain like Velcro and positive experiences are deflected like Teflon. So often we focus on our sorrows. When we are feeling sad or worried or angry then we shouldn't pretend these sorrows aren't there. But, we should allow for the possibility of joy. As followers of Jesus, who are sustained by the Holy Spirit, we follow a spiritual path through sorrow and into joy.

Now from the safety of your home, we are connected by the Holy Spirit. But, we also have a little privacy. In the privacy of your own home, I want you to say something out loud. I want you to say "I want to be happy." Go ahead. Say it out loud. "I want to be happy." What happens when you say this out loud? "I want to be happy."

Do you feel like you need to look over your shoulder to see if someone is listening as you dare to consider such a thing?

Maybe you wonder if it could really be possible?

Or, perhaps you feel a sense of relief at finally letting yourself say it out loud. "I want to be happy."

Whatever your response, this is how you take a first step toward awakening joy in your own life. Say it aloud again. "I want to be happy."

And, joy can be infectious, in a good way. Joy can be infectious.

Now for me infectious joy is expressed through music. So, from the safety of your own homes let us sing for joy to our God using the words on your screen.

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee
God of glory, Lord of love
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee
Op'ning to the Sun above
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness
drive the dark of doubt away
Giver of immortal gladness
fill us with the light of day

All Thy works with joy surround Thee
Earth and heav'n reflect Thy rays
Stars and angels sing around Thee

center of unbroken praise
Field and forest, vale and mountain
Flow'ry meadow, flashing sea
chanting[5] bird and flowing fountain
call us to rejoice in Thee

Thou art giving and forgiving
ever blessing, ever blest
well-spring of the joy of living
ocean-depth of happy rest
Thou the[6] Father, Christ our Brother—
all who live in love are Thine
Teach us how to love each other
lift us to the Joy Divine

This hymn has a fourth verse which we don't have in our hymnal.

Mortals, join the mighty chorus,
Which the morning stars began;
God's own love is reigning o'er us,
Joining people hand in hand.
Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music leads us sunward
In the triumph song of life.

The words for this hymn were written at the beginning of the twentieth century by Henry van Dyke to accompany the beautiful music composed by Ludwig van Beethoven.

At that time, Van Dyke wrote that “these verses are simple expressions of common Christian feelings and desires in this present time—hymns of today that may be sung together by people who know the thought of the age, and are not afraid that any truth of science will destroy religion, or any revolution on earth overthrow the kingdom of heaven. Therefore this is a hymn of trust and joy and hope.” I think this is still true today.

May you continue to feel connected to God and to others by the power of the Holy Spirit. May those connections fill you with joy. Rejoice and know that you are loved.

Now, this is where I was originally going to end my sermon today. But, the events of the last two days compel me to share one more things.

Not everyone in our society is in a place of joy, some for good reason. We have not been very good to our brothers and sisters of color. As a person of privilege I want to recognize that things need to change in our country. Too many, especially black men, do not know what violence they will receive. And, sometimes the violence is from those who are supposed to protect us.

So, I want to share a poem or prayer by a Lutheran Pastor named Nadia Bolz Webber.

Let us pray.

God whose name has been used to enslave those who bear your image,
God whose name has been used to steal this land and kill those who bear your image,
God whose name was called upon by Moses and Miriam and Martin Luther King Jr
and Sojourner Truth, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.
God who raised up prophets to speak truth to power, and poets to speak truth to
stupid,
We call on your holy name to give us what we need to undo what has been done in
your name.
We call on your name to bring your fierce mercy upon us and remove our
complacency and our complicity.
We call on your name to heal the wounds of those whose daily reality we do not
understand.
We call on your name to give us a holy curiosity about what being Black in America is
really like, Lord.
We call on your name to free us from our cherished notions of being “good” that keep
us from hearing this truth,
We call on your name to give us this day our daily truth, our daily humility, our daily
rage, our daily hope.
This country is burning Lord...may is be a cleansing Holy Spirit fire.
Guide us to believe that the true name of God is stronger than what has been done in
God’s name.
Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.