

***Struggle and Joy***  
**Hebrews 13:1-2; Nehemiah 8: 9-10**  
**Sermon by Joanne Gallardo**  
**July 1, 2018**

13Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup>Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

I have now stated in a sermon 3 times that I am a pessimist. This puts me at a particular disadvantage when tasked with coming up with a sermon about joy. To defend my fellow pessimists, we are not devoid of joy. I laugh a lot, I'm at a good place in life with a good community and many friends surrounding me, and I try to practice gratefulness. There is much, for me, at least, to be joyful about! I'm just always keenly aware that there is a lot going on that is discouraging, as well. Eternal optimists sometimes make me frustrated. I'm afraid optimism has the potential to move us into complacency and removes some of the fire within us that keeps us striving for justice, the fire that keeps us (for lack of a better word) "woke." There is always a struggle, and I want to be a part of it.

However, those are biases and judgments on my part. Joy and struggle are not mutually exclusive. As I parsed this concept in writing this sermon, I tried to think of a time in my life where joy and struggle were at home in my heart and in my person. The most joyous and most struggle-heavy part of my life were the several years I spent working with the chronically homeless and severely mentally ill in Washington DC.

In 2014 I felt called. I had read a lot of Dorothy Day, done a lot of praying, and felt called to public service in the city, particularly Washington DC since it was so close to where I was living in Harrisonburg. After passing on my resume to friends in the city, I soon landed an interview then job with Pathways to Housing, a non-profit that worked with people who had 6+ years of chronic homelessness in their life,

plus a severe and persistent mental illness. Over 70% of our clientele were addicted to either alcohol or an illegal substance. This was all new to me, but I knew I was right where God wanted me to be. God was going to use my gifts to bring some assistance to the lives of people who so desperately needed someone positive in their life. I couldn't be a pessimist anymore, I had to hold hope for folks who had absolutely nothing to be joyful about. I started reading a whole lot of Dorothy Day.

A scripture that was important to me in those days was the famous passage from Hebrews 13. Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. This was also a passage that was dear to our friend Dorothy Day. I knew that Jesus was in the face of every person I was encountering. And Jesus was being ignored. Jesus was addicted. Jesus had no place to call home. Jesus had no family connections. Jesus slept over a grate in Chinatown. Jesus asked me for money and food every time he saw me. Now I had a wonderful cross-cultural experience doing the CASAS program in Guatemala for my SST at Goshen College. I learned a lot. For many, living without plumbing and washing clothes in rain barrels was living outside of their comfort zone. I was more accustomed to rustic living. But THIS, sleeping outside, having facial burns from crack pipes, getting beat up for owing money, learning to live unshowered, uncomfortable, and hungry...this was the biggest cultural divide I had ever encountered.

I knew I was in over my head with this one, but I refused to admit it. I'm rather pig headed in that way. I developed several coping strategies over the years for working with that population. The first that developed was thick skin. I was not always the harbinger of good news. I denied people their money, I refused to be where drugs were being used, I refused transportation, I felt like I was being mean at times. And did I ever hear about it. I had things thrown at me, I was spit at, cussed at, I had a knife pulled on me, and I had people jump out of my moving car. It soon became commonplace, and I slowly but surely started to not take offence. But it took a while.

Second, I learned how to run. On several occasions, I had to run to get out of a dangerous situation or away from certain people. Your legs can move faster than you think they can when someone's chasing you. Third, I developed compassion. Before this experience, I would have liked to have thought that I had compassion. But that compassion was tried again and again. People kept making the same self destructive choices, money was spent in poorly mismanaged ways, people fought other people over ridiculous things, and I soon ran out of compassion. But this is where I could lean on my spirituality. I prayed to remember to see the face of Christ in everyone, to understand that addiction is a dreadful monster to overcome, that mental illness has people doing and saying things that they might not ordinarily say or do. As I said before, Jesus was in the face of each stranger I was encountering.

My earlier thought had been wrong. I thought I was going to bring about this life changing help into other peoples' lives, improve their lives, and get them on the right track. Instead, my life was changed, my life was improved, and I was put on the path that eventually led me to congregational ministry. But getting there, and working in such a place, was a struggle.

What does all of this have to do with joy? While I have been dwelling on the parts of my time that were full of struggle, I also encountered a deep, abiding, and grounded joy from my clients and my coworkers. The times this joy was most evident was during our celebrations. Every summer we had a cookout at a park in Southeast, every Thanksgiving we had a holiday meal and dance, and during the warm months, we frequently had cookouts in our parking lot. People who had nothing, who lived with suffering every day were some of the most joyous people, helping to both plan and take part in any sort of festivity we had planned.

To show you what kind of joy we had going on, I have this video clip of one of my favorite clients getting the dance floor started after our 2016 Thanksgiving Dinner. He was joined by a lady friend, and then later joined by a whole lot of us. I had the privilege of dancing with this man, who I'll call Charles, for long into the afternoon. \*PLAY VIDEO\* In rather joyful news, this man moved back in with his family in Virginia, and no longer needed to be a client of ours.

For those with food insecurity, eating was a joyous occasion. Each event had massive quantities of food available for folks to not only eat their fill at the event, but also take food home to their friends and families. Food signified community, and it was a way we as staff could show love to our clients. Every staff person would chip in by bringing something to our events. Some brought turkeys, or stuffing, mashed potatoes, we'd keep it light on the vegetables since they were always bypassed, so it seemed.

Not all of us knew each and every single client we served, but close. This is what I think the scriptures talk about when they talk about entertaining angels. By opening ourselves up to people we may not know, we are engaging in Holy Hospitality, which in itself is joyful. Every time you open your home, and your pantry, and your wallet, and your time, and your attention to people you don't know, you are inviting Christ himself in. To quote Dorothy Day: "What we would like to do is change the world--make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, the poor, of the destitute--the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words--we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as our friend."

At these events we hosted, there was music, dancing (as you saw), and much, much talking. There were people who we've had to call the police on for being violent laugh and play basketball, or play with the dog of our executive director. We had people who have disappeared on us for weeks at a time sing the opening blessing for our meal. People who were into hardcore drugs dance better than anybody when we started up the music. These people were no strangers to struggle. These were also people who were no strangers to joy.

My clients showed me how to party. My clients showed me how to dance. My clients showed me how to go crab picking, which is both a joy and a struggle of a

different sort. My clients showed me that their faith is central to whom they are as a person and Christ is the origin of all that is good and right in their lives. My clients showed me the churches across the city that opened their doors, and closets, and kitchens to anyone who has need. My clients showed me that treating myself, however sometimes fiscally irresponsible, is sometimes necessary to stay sane and just feel good.

While many things in life are a choice, I think it's near impossible to "choose happiness." And we can get into all sorts of trouble when telling people in a variety of circumstances to "choose happiness." I do think, however, that you can choose joy. Joy and happiness aren't the same thing. I see happiness as transient, an emotion that can possess you but leave you as quickly as it came due to any number of circumstances. Loss, brain chemistry, the state of the world can leave us feeling bereft of happiness. But that need not eliminate our joy. I believe joy is organic, contagious, and deep. Joy comes from that deep, abiding sense of groundedness, rootedness, and peace in something greater than ourselves, in knowing that we have, for lack of a better word, backup. Our safety net is God. Our safety net is our community. Our safety net is ourselves.

I think of this two sided coin of struggle and joy the way I see the two sided coin of grief and joy. Grief is a very real, tangible, visceral state that can weigh on us heavily and have a deep impact on our day to day life. Yet when we grieve the loss of a loved one, or a job, or a relationship, we also remember joy. The person, the job, whatever it was, it was a joy to have been part of it. In memorial services, we remember the joyful without forgetting that we feel very real grief. In those cases, I believe, joy and grief live together, hand in hand.

Earlier I spoke about safety nets, about back up. For people who come from a place of struggle, be that emotional, economic, or otherwise, knowing that we are not alone is key. Loneliness sucks the joy out of life, making things more difficult, giving us a sense of hopelessness. Our task as Christians is to spread the good news, and part of that good news is that God abides in and around us, over us and under us. There is literally no place we can go where God is not.

I also said our safety net is our community. I feel Mennonites have a good understanding of this, in my experience. When God feels distant, and when we can't quite yet trust ourselves, community has the ability to bring us unlimited joy. There's joy in fellowship, in laughing together, in playing together, in working together to further God's work on earth, that extra hand when the struggle feels too intense. In these things we can find joy.

Our safety net, allowing us to breathe easier, is ourselves. I don't mean this in a selfish, completely self sufficient way, but rather, I mean this in a Luke 17 way. The King James version says that "Neither shall they say, 'Lo here!' or 'Lo there!' for behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Within each one of us is the power, and the holiness, and the deep sense of joy of the kingdom of God. We don't have to travel to some holy site. We need not seek out earthly things to bring us that joy. Everything holy, everything good, everything God-inspired is sitting within ourselves, waiting to be encountered.

In each of these layers that provide us with joy, there is strength. Joy IS strength. There is nothing complacent, nothing minimizing, nothing avoidant about joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength because we cannot do what we're tasked to do, we cannot fight injustice, stand up for what's right, be the hands and feet of Christ to one another unless we have that joy, that deep abiding centeredness with the Holy. That acknowledgement of these layers, these safety nets that catch us when we struggle, is what keeps us rooted and grounded in the joy of the Lord.

So when we watch the news, when we hear about families being separated, when we feel the ground is breaking apart beneath our feet let us please remember to work, to be present, to incite change and reformation in the spirit of Jesus into the world around us. When we feel that struggle within ourselves let's lean into that, not shying away from the hard work of our own grief, giving ourselves permission to feel how we feel. But let us also remember joy. Not a cheapened version of joy over material items or things that are fleeting, but the joy that comes from being grounded and centered in the One who breaks the darkness, who gives freedom to the captives, who allows little children to come unto him, and who envelops us in deep abiding love. Amen.