

“No One Will Take Your Joy”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

¹⁶“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and ‘Because I am going to the Father?’” ¹⁸They said, “What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’?” ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²²So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:12-22)

When it comes to spiritual blessings, I have to think that one of the greatest has to be joy. We would at least put it in the top four if the season of Advent has anything to say about it, given that we often refer to the four candles in an Advent wreath with individual labels of Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. In the kingdom of God, joy is a mark of a life well lived, a goal of every faithful person, a benefit that everyone wants, a gift we all hope for.

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning,” promise the psalms.¹

“Shout aloud and sing for joy,” say the prophets.²

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy,” Paul prays.³ “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!”⁴

But **what is joy?** The quick response most of us would give is happiness. But then again, that doesn’t feel like a complete answer. Happiness is wonderful, but does it really rise to the level of joy? Doesn’t joy seem to be greater than mere happiness?

J.D. Salinger, the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, thought so. In one of his short stories, he took a shot at an explanation of the difference, writing that “the most singular difference between happiness and joy is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid.”⁵

My first thought on reading that was that it didn’t really help. But the more I pondered it the more I thought Salinger might be on to something. Maybe happiness is

¹ Psalm 30:5.

² Isaiah 12:6.

³ Romans 15:13.

⁴ Philippians 4:4.

⁵ <https://quotepark.com/>



somehow more of a solid, material thing, something that can be picked up and held more easily. Maybe the spiritual reality of joy really does flow more nimbly and gracefully -- more like a liquid than a solid. Perhaps happiness is more material and joy more spiritual. Perhaps happiness is based on external reality while joy is more of an inward, internal thing. Maybe the object of happiness can be swept away more readily... while joy falls like gentle rain into the cracks and crevasses of our lives, watering the garden of our spirits and also becoming much more difficult to extract, even as storm winds blow.

One thing I can say with assurance is that lately I have been reminded of just how vulnerable happiness can be. I think, for example, of those families in Uvalde (*u-val-dee*) that had been celebrating birthdays and looking forward to vacations in one moment, and then, in one fateful hour, had all of that happiness tragically ripped from them. I think of families in the Ukraine, torn apart by war, wondering if they will ever be truly happy again. I think of the sorrow of this congregation as we mourn the loss of Steve Williams to pancreatic cancer, a disease that creeps surreptitiously and then attacks viciously and with little warning. Happiness, it has been said, can be “as fragile as a bird’s heartbeat.”⁶

This all reminds me of a gathering I once attended during my first call as a pastor. It was held in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in the auditorium of what had once been Booker T. Washington High School. The room was known well for a speech that was delivered there on November 27, 1962. James Salisbury was just a boy, but he remembers that night as if it were yesterday. His father came home early from work, whisked him up in his arms, and said, “We are going to see the Sing-Song Preacher tonight.” The room was already packed when they squeezed into the balcony, and it erupted when the guest of honor finally came out onto the stage. His famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. was still nine months in the future, but that autumn night Martin Luther King, Jr. electrified the crowd with words that would later become so familiar:

*“I have a dream that one day right here in Rocky Mount, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will meet at the table of brotherhood, knowing that one God brought man to the face of the Earth. I have a dream tonight that one day my little daughter and my two sons will grow up in a world not conscious of the color of their skin, but only conscious of the fact that they are members of the human race...”*⁷

As King spoke, James remembers looking over at his father who had never known life without the dehumanizing oppression of Jim Crow segregation. Tears of joy were in his father’s eyes as he kept shouting, “I have seen the Black Moses!”

“I never saw him act like that in church,” James said. “His eyes full of joyful tears hands raised you would think he was in a Pentecostal service.”⁸ He said it was as if his father was in a “process of levitation,” and that elevated sense of joy could be felt all over the room, as hope began to break into the consciousness of long-suffering people.

The night I was there in that room, more than fifty years later, could not be more different. There were tears that night, but they were bitter tears. Just days before, the

⁶ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/2016693/Kate-Atkinson-Happiness-like-life-itself-was-as-fragile-as-a-bird-s-heartbeat-as-fleeting>

⁷ “Martin Luther King Jr. 1929-1968” at <http://www.stoppingpoints.com/north-carolina>, May 8, 2012.

⁸ James Salisbury, <https://curmilus.wordpress.com/2021/01/19/rocky-mount-nc-the-sing-song-preacher-the-first-i-have-a-dream-speech-by-james-salisbury/amp/>

community had been rocked by a drive-by shooting that took the lives of two young men. It was just the latest in a series of tragedies. Rocky Mount, situated on I-95 at the mid-point between New York and Miami, had become a hub for the drug trade, and gang violence had drastically escalated.

But it wasn't just drugs and violence that was on our minds and hearts. It was deeper than that. Half a century had passed, but the same old problems Dr. King had addressed in that very room – economic injustice, cultural inequities, lack of opportunities, and the suborn hold of systemic racism were still plaguing black families. That night, for two and a half hours, the African-American community of Rocky Mount wailed, vented, and raised their laments. The auditorium crackled with raw and unfiltered anger, grief, frustration, and sadness. It was just one more reminder of how vulnerable happiness can be, how fleeting it can be – “as fragile as a bird's heartbeat.”

But I still think that Salinger was on to something, and a conversation I had this past week convinced me of that. Let me say first that my family truly loves living in the manse, and we feel very blessed and lucky to live there. I would say it is one of the things that gives us joy about living in Larchmont. But we have had a bit of a problem with one of the showers. From time to time, one of the upstairs tubs has dripped down and broken through the living room ceiling. The good news is that, this week, I think we solved the problem. PPM brought in Leo, their special projects guru, and through trial and error, Leo and I found the issue: the shower fixture had a faulty seal. The gap in the gasket was not big, but if the water hit it just right, it would drip straight down to the living room.

At one point in our deliberations, as we pondered different theories, Leo said we just had to keep looking. It could be a small issue, he said, “but the water always wins.” If there is any way the water can get out or seep in, the water will find it. It made me think back to our time living on the coast, when the state would spend millions upon millions of dollars moving sand to shore up spots that were being eroded by the ocean, and then one good storm comes along, and it is like they had done nothing at all. The water always wins.

And that is the primary point I want to make about joy and its link with Trinity Sunday. In this passage of John, Jesus is telling the disciples that pain will likely be a part of life. From time to time, we will experience pressure, anguish, tribulation, or persecution. But Jesus also makes a promise. “You will have pain,” he says, “but your pain will turn to joy.” Just like when a woman is in labor, he continues, you will have pain.

“But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

At times, that promise must have seemed far-fetched to the disciples, perhaps even laughable. Because the liquid nature of joy makes it hard to grasp, it can slip through our fingers if we try too hard to hold onto it or own it. But when joy is connected to God, when we see God as the one source of true joy, it will not slip through our fingers. It will settle into our lives and no one will take it. That is the promise.

And that promise is not coming from just anybody. Jesus was with us in the flesh, but the Triune God was, is, and will be much more than flesh. I am not going to pretend to explain how the Trinity works – how God can be both three and one – three persons in one substance. That kind of wisdom is way beyond my paygrade. But there is a handle that helps me hold onto the concept of the Trinity even if I do not fully understand it. It is

something that the theologian Shirley Guthrie once wrote – the idea that God is not just three persons in one, but three **actions** in one. Creation... Salvation... and Transformation... Father/Son/Holy Spirit. And those actions, just like the three persons, are inseparable.⁹ So, God the Father didn't create alone – the Son and the Spirit were just as present and just as involved. Christ did not become incarnate alone or die alone or rise up from the grave alone – the Creator and the Holy Spirit were just as present and just as involved. And the Holy Spirit does not guide us, teach us, console us, and encourage us alone – God the Father and the Son are right there too, just as present and just as involved.

So that is why, when Jesus promises, “*No one will take your joy from you,*” you can count on that promise, because it is not just coming from a human who died just like every other human will. That promise comes from the fullness of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... Creator, Savior, and Life-giver.

And the promise of that joy really does seem to be more like a liquid than a solid. Happiness can be blown away by the storms of life. But joy has a way of lingering... lingering like the joy of those people in that Rocky Mount auditorium where the joyful hope of God's promise that someday justice would come rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, had seeped into the walls, and the joy of that revelation had flowed down into the cracks of those souls – joy dripping down like honey in into those people in such volume and with such power that it could be passed down from generation to generation, enduring disappointment after disappointment, and still somehow live and breathe in people whose hearts were breaking yet again, but could still lay claim to the promise of the Triune God that “*you may have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*”

God's joy is that kind of liquid, and it always wins. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁹ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 86.