

December 11, 2022
Third Sunday of Advent

Meditation: "Happy vs. Joyful"

I remember one winter many years ago. I had a pair of boots that were past their prime. There was a small hole in the sole of one boot, and both had the upper separating from the sole. This meant that if I stepped in a cold slushy puddle my boots would fill with icy water and my socks would squish with every step and I would get chilled to the bone. And then, I received a new pair of boots: boots with good soles, boots that were waterproof, boots that were warm. Receiving those boots made me happy. Walking about in the winter weather and slushy puddles with those boots and having my feet stay warm and dry gave me great pleasure. But I would stop short at saying I experienced joy because of the boots.

I pulled the thesaurus off the shelf and looked up joy. It listed happy and pleasure as synonyms, yet I think that joy goes well beyond those two. As I thought about joy this week I remembered an experience of joy I felt a few (twenty-some) years ago when I was volunteering at a homeless drop-in and working Street Outreach with the homeless in North York.

Fred, I'll call him, was a quiet, gentle soul. He was, as the Bible would say, full of years. For decades he had owned and operated his own electronics repair shop, following which, for over twenty years he had been homeless. Fred was a regular at the Wednesday morning drop-in. He was always polite and respectful of others, and never caused any problems. He really liked it if someone would play a game of chess or checkers with him and engage him in conversation. He told me that the drop-in was the only place he ever had conversations with anyone because outside of the drop-in nobody had any time for a homeless person.

One day Fred had gone outside for a smoke and he started coughing. He coughed and coughed and coughed. He coughed until he was coughing up blood. I knew that wasn't good and so I called for one of the two retired doctors who volunteered at the drop-in. They both came running and moments later asked someone to call 911 for an ambulance. Fred, and his belongings, were rushed off to hospital. I can't remember now what the cause was, just that it wasn't tuberculosis or anything else that was contagious.

A few days later, with the Street Outreach team, we visited Fred in hospital. The doctors had told him that if he returned to the streets, he'd likely be dead within weeks. Fred was ready to receive the help that we offered. We offered to help him get a place to live, to open a bank account, to register for Ontario Works, to get startup funding, to get the few essentials he'd need, along with some groceries, and to get him moved into his new home. By the time Fred was ready to be discharged from hospital, everything, other than the groceries, had been arranged. We drove Fred to get a few groceries and dropped him and all of his stuff at his new home and helped him get set up in the rooming house we'd found. He had a large room with a bed, a table and a few chairs, a kitchenette, and a bathroom. The house also had a large deck outside with seating for all of the residents to use.

A few weeks later, we went to check on Fred, to see how things were going. He was elated to see us. It was the first time in decades that he had received visitors. Like any good host, he insisted on making tea for us – the best he had to offer. As we talked on the deck, he told us that it was the first time in decades that he had a roof over his head, food in a cupboard, a bank account with money in it, cheques with his name and address on them, and a place to host visitors. He had tears in his eyes when we said our goodbyes.

On the way to our next call, we reflected on the visit. We talked about the gratitude Fred had expressed for all we had done. We also talked about the deep and profound sense of joy that we felt at seeing Fred finally succeed in life, at seeing Fred happy for the first time in decades.

So what does joy look like? Isaiah describes joy as the dry land blossoming after rains that will bring springs and streams to the desert. The exiles will experience great joy when they return home to Israel from their bondage in Babylon, when the Persian leader Cyrus sets them free.

So what is the difference between happiness and joy? Well, for one, I think that happiness is directed inward, it's about me, whereas joy is directed outward. The joy we felt during that visit with Fred was joy for Fred's new life. Fred's life had been transformed, for the better. That is why we felt joy. We really had little to do with it. The decision to seek help, and to be housed, and have a bank account, and all the other things, was Fred's. We just helped him achieve his goals. That, and shared in his joy.

While the boots made life more pleasant, they were not what I would call life altering or life giving. Whether I had new boots or not was not going to be the death of me, or restore life. The joy we experienced in the visit with Fred was because it was about relationship, but it went beyond relationship. The joy we felt was at seeing someone who was spiritually dead and was now alive. To see Fred thriving, or as Isaiah might say, blossoming, brought great joy to our hearts.

So two things I might say about joy is that it is directed outward, and that it has something to do with something that is life giving. A third thing I noticed is that our experience of joy was unexpected. While we planned to check up on Fred, the way the visit turned out was unexpected. In the Isaiah passage it was an unexpected rain that brought forth blossoms in the dry land, and there was to be an unexpected release from bondage in a foreign land. And yet, for these unexpected things to result in joy, we must take note of them.

The question I have for today is do we take note of the unexpected? If Jesus walked in here today, would he be who we expected? Would we take note of him? I suspect most of us would like Jesus to be here as a cute baby who would make us feel warm and cuddly inside. Someone who would make us feel good about ourselves so we could continue on living the way we always have. Someone who wouldn't make any claims on us, or try to change us or the way we live. But what if Jesus came and turned our world and our lives upside down? What if Jesus asked us to give up our homes, our wealth, our relationships, and to follow in his footsteps? Would we recognize Jesus then? And even if we did, would it bring us joy?

Advent is a time of waiting. Waiting for Christmas. Waiting for the baby Jesus. Waiting for the return of the risen Christ. And as we wait, we need to recognize one more thing. Jesus is waiting. Jesus is waiting for us. Jesus is waiting for us to recognize him. Jesus is waiting for us to follow him. Jesus is waiting for all of this, so that our joy may be made complete. May it be so.