

## SERMON: “Joy Within”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, April 25, 2021

*PRAYER: “Joy is now in every place, now be with us in your grace. Bless us, holy Jesus. Now and ever may we find your good news to fill our mind. Bless us, holy Jesus. Amen.”*

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A Zen Buddhist story:

*A monk is being chased by a ferocious tiger. As he runs, he comes to the edge of a cliff. Looking back, he sees that the hungry tiger is gaining on him, about to leap on him. Seeing no other option, the monk grabs hold of a rope that is dangling over the cliff’s edge and begins to shimmy down to escape his pursuer.*

*Before long, he dares to look down and sees nothing but a pile of jagged rocks some five hundred feet below him.*

*At that moment, he sensed that he was in serious trouble.*

*To top things off, just above his head, two mice begin gnawing on the rope.*

*While all this is happening, the monk catches sight of a strawberry growing out of a crack in the rock-face beside him.*

*He picks it and eats it and exclaims:*

*“That is the best strawberry that I have ever tasted in my entire life!”* 1

Through exaggeration and over-dramatization, this story makes an important point.

If the monk had allowed himself to be pre-occupied with his past (the tiger), and/or with his future (the jagged rocks),

### I JESU, JOY OF OUR DESIRING

Listen again to these words from the gospel of John, chapter 15:9-11

*“I love you just as my Divine Parent loves me; remain in my love.*

*If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love,*

*just as I have obeyed my parental God’s commands and remain in God’s love.*

*I have told you these things that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

In the unfolding of John’s gospel these words appear within a long series of farewell speeches that Jesus shares with his disciples.

He has washed their feet. They are sharing a Passover meal.

Perhaps they were reminiscing about the few years they had been together on a mission journey.

Jesus informs them that it is all coming to a close, a rather painful one.

Between that past and that future and their not yet certain future,

Jesus tells them: “Love one another. Stay connected. Receive my joy”

The joy of Jesus is ever here and ever now.

The joy of Jesus, the joy of being close to God, settles deep within, infusing our being.

I wonder, how often do we experience that? How often do we reflect that?

Maybe not so often. Maybe we mostly move about like it’s the morning after the party.

Maybe, like other, we get immersed in the hum-drum, lacklustre routines of daily life that cloak themselves around us before we even get into January like extra sweaters and scarves and a heavy parka, leaving us dispirited for a time.

PCR: Post-Christmas Regression.

We become wound up in the strange notion that if we just stay busy: working, exercising, volunteering, taking care of household chores and errands, staying active -- then we will feel great, we will experience joy.

Oh, there can be moments I suppose; but nothing that lasts or runs very deep.

Instead, we find ourselves over-taxed or run down.

Okay, so let's just rest up for a while, and then, get busy again.

Sunk into a funk or feeling blah,

we somehow believe the solution is to kick ourselves back into action.

Busy-ness like this is almost always about cleaning up something from the past or about pushing towards some deadline or project or goal in the future.

Busy-ness like this seldom has time for the present.

Joy within, joy that feels fulfilling and complete, can't take much root in such busy-ness.

*"I have told you these things that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*

Jesus was talking about and offering an enduring way of being in every here and every now.

Staying connected to God like branches on a grapevine, living out of a purpose of love, being in tune with God and creation: these are ways we can ground our lives in joy.

Such a joy then becomes reflected in our doing and activity, and in our being.

And then, day in and day out, we get to sing like St. Paul:

*"the joy of my life in Christ is my strength."* (cf. *Philippians 4:4, 4:13*)

And I wonder. I wonder if one of the blessings in the midst of this global pandemic that has hurled us into social distancing and times of isolation and lockdown

is that we have had more time to ourselves, more time at home, more time with loved ones, more time to just be, yes?, to just be in the here and now of present moments.

## II JOY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

We have celebrated, I hope in some way, another Earth Day.

Most of us have taken time each day to be outdoors,

to allow creation to lead us into joy, to be our partner in joy.

Jesus knew that creation is ever ready and eager to do that:

*"Consider the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field."* (*Matthew 6:26, 28*)

And as with creation, so also with creativity.

I suspect it's correct for me to believe that all of us also know this and have experienced it.

Maybe it's only a matter of giving ourselves permission and time to experience it more, to let it run deep, to let it flood our souls more often.

Break away from housework and make and enjoy a soothing cup of tea,

or put on a half-an-hour or so of your favorite music.

Could be classical music or opera, or jazz, or Broadway tunes.  
Could be folk music, or blues, or rock and roll. Whatever works for you.  
And ... just sit with it. Listen. Let it seep into your being and transport you.  
Take time out too to maintain your God connection.  
Spend fifteen minutes in prayer perhaps before you dive into your day.  
And/or spend fifteen minutes in prayer before you dive into bed to sleep.  
Some of you know the joy of curling up with a good book or a collection of poetry.  
Visits to an art gallery can work the same way, even a virtual tour.  
Let yourself be captivated by one or two works of art.  
When did you last pamper your body by soaking in a bathtub?  
Oh, the joy of languishing in the scent of lavender, or oleander, or ylang-ylang!  
Go ahead, love yourself from time to time. Our bodies are their own wonderland.  
And enjoy creation. Walk a beach. Take a hike. Stroll in a meadow. Climb every mountain.  
Creation will welcome you, feed you, befriend you, and restore your soul.  
Can you pass by a green-centred trillium and not stop to notice it?  
Have you wondered what sermons for Spring might issue from a Jack-in-the-pulpit?  
“Come on, all my forest friends,” cries a voice from a spongy woodland floor.  
“Let’s perk up this place and welcome it back to life!”  
Joy, joy, joy! How great the joy!  
And again and again, creation rejoices to introduce to its Creator.

### III JOY IN RELATIONSHIPS

The Creator is also our Divine Parent and Perpetual Lover.  
The joy within, the fullness of joy that Jesus spoke about, is deeply relational.  
It will take us to the core reality of our humanity; to the heart of our own innate divinity.  
Joy within is grounded in abiding in the love of Jesus, the Christ.  
Joy within is experienced as we obey Jesus’ command to “love one another”.  
*“You are my friends if you do what I command you.  
I do not call you servants any longer.... Instead, I call you friends.” (John 15:12-15)*

I trust that we all have friends with whom we associate from time to time, even frequently.  
We may go shopping with them, play sports with them, share projects with them,  
watch a movie with them, dine with them, and so on.  
Being a friend of Jesus, tapping into, experiencing that joy within that runs deeper.  
There may only be one or two people in our lives with whom we have that kind of relationship.  
Perhaps it is captured best in the Celtic wisdom of *anam cara*, that translates into “soul mate”.  
A soul mate is fully devoted to understanding the other person. Often, it’s reciprocal.  
It becomes rather difficult to describe such a relationship in words.  
Some soul mates are so psychically and spiritually connected they may know  
what each other is thinking or feeling even though they are many kilometers apart.

Some years ago, I visited a parishioner named Martha. She was very excited because her best friend, Lettie, whom she hadn't seen in four years, was coming for a visit. Over those four years, there had been letters and phone calls, but the prospect of actually being in each other's presence gave Martha goose bumps. "So, tell me about you and Lettie," I asked. "Oh, we've known each other since high school. Even then, we really "knew" each other. We had the same favorite colour: turquoise; and the same tastes in music and movies. And we're both chocoholics. We can almost live inside each other's skin. There isn't anything I wouldn't share with Lettie, nor her with me. She touches me where my bone and my marrow meet. We sense what's good for each other and offer that before it's even asked for. We wrap one another in caring: layer on layer of successes and failures shared, hurts attended to, losses consoled, celebrations truly celebrated. I can call her at three in the morning and she won't get upset. She can land on my door-step unannounced with worry written all over her face and I'll take her in and won't let her go until she's anxiety-free. In the winter times of life, she's my down-filled coat. In the summer times of life, she's like a bold and bright designer scarf around my neck. We bathe each other in acceptance: gifts, blessings, talents, warts, imperfections, moods -- whatever makes me, me and Lettie, Lettie -- all of it loved; some of it challenged, none of it disrespected or disdained. Kindred spirits, as some people say, who can reach into each other's soul." "Wow!" I exclaimed. "That is so precious, so wonderful!" "'Tis", she beamed. "More tea? Would you like to meet her when she's here?" "I'd love to." And I did. In watching them inter-relate, I knew all those words were true. I've been privileged to have seen it quite a bit. Perhaps you have too. Even better, perhaps you have experienced it and shared that inner joy.

## CONCLUSION

*"... that my joy may be in you and that your joy might be complete."*

These words are often read at wedding ceremonies in the hope that married couples and life partners will become soul mates. Sometimes they do. I hope and pray we all might already have or find a soul mate. And ... Jesus is the soul mate *par excellence*. More than just a prayer buddy, Jesus enfolds his followers in love and then sends them diving into deep community with others around whom his love is also wrapped. We get in on the joy of rubbing knees and elbows with other friends of Jesus, and when we can't do that as much, as has been true of late, we connect by Zoom or phone or social media. It's in such a community that we seek to live out his imperative to love one another.

We don't find it by being lost in busy-ness. We find it by being present and attentive.  
We find it in the here and now.  
It's akin to what's at the heart of new age spiritual guru Eckhart Tolle's books and talks.  
I once saw it written on a coffee shop wall, a quote from the writings of Leo Tolstoy:  
*"If you want to be happy, be."*  
Jesus yet whispers it in our ears:  
*"If you obey my commands, you will abide in my love ...  
I have told you these things that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.  
This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you."*  
Outside of Christian tradition, but not totally dissimilar from it,  
there are some yogic exercises that can help us tap into inner joy from time to time.  
One of them is the *asana* known as "happy baby". Not easy to do in a suit or robe.  
But, if sometime you are in comfortable clothes or pajamas,  
lie on your back on a floor or on your bed, do your best to grab the insides of your ankles,  
and then rock back and forth side to side, you know,  
like you did when you were an infant and you were absolutely content.  
Another movement is known as "breath of joy". You can do it standing or sitting.  
Just make sure you are at least an arm's length away from anyone else.  
Swing your arms out front. Then, out side. Then up, and then bend down as far as you're able.  
As you bend down let out an audible exhale. Come up again and repeat. Choose your own pace.  
Each time your arms go out, you release joy. Then you bend down to gather some up again.  
*"I have told you these things that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*  
We do have it. Jesus' offer extends to us. It's here, now, ever ready, ever available.  
We've got the joy, joy, joy of Jesus down in our hearts, down in our hearts to stay.  
Tap in. Feel it. Delight in it.  
I know, by now, if not sooner, you're saying to yourself, "I could have preached that sermon".  
And that's true. You could have.  
Even better, let us all endeavour to be living demonstrations of it.  
Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for the gift of joy within,  
for the gift of knowing, receiving, and sharing the abiding, transformative love of God within.

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#### *Notes*

- 1 In Bernard Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, (Multnomah, Sisters, OR: 2005), page 54.
- 2 For more about anamcara, see John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, (Cliff Street Books, New York, NY: 1997).