

Sermons from Park Hill: December 16, 2007

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Isaiah 35: 1-10, Matthew 11: 2-11
“Are You the One?”

One day in heaven, Jesus was feeling kind of lonely. He hadn't seen his earthly father in a long time; he didn't even know what he looked like anymore.

Jesus was walking along, looking about, when he spotted an elderly man sitting on a golden bench, sobbing as if his heart would break. Jesus immediately sat down next to the guy and asked “what's the matter?”

The old man raised his head and sobbed, “I'm looking for my son!”

Jesus wondered. “Tell me, was your son really your biological son?”

“No ... he wasn't. But he was no less special to me.”

“Well, was he sort of... not exactly human?” as Jesus leaned forward, eager to hear the answer.

“Well, he was human enough ... but he wasn't”

Jesus was so excited he interrupted. “Are you ... a carpenter?!”

“Yes ... I was.”

“Is your name Joseph?”

“Well ... translated, it is.”

Jesus threw his arms around the old man and cried: “JOSEPH! FATHER!!”

The man wrapped his arms around Jesus and cried out in joy, “Oh, PINOCCHIO!!”

Today is “Joy” Sunday. We have to laugh. In my experience, however, joy can be a difficult feeling for liberals to embrace. Our natural inclination to question, to doubt, to be realists, makes us suspicious of people who are too cheerful: “Don't you know how much suffering there is in the world?” Perhaps we're afraid that if we embrace joy we'll go soft on our commitments to justice.

Yvette Flunder made this point as one of the General Synod preachers in Atlanta in 2005. She is the founding pastor of the fast-growing City of Refuge UCC in San Francisco, a predominantly African American lesbian, gay,

Sermons from Park Hill: December 16, 2007

bisexual, and transgender congregation. She is a liberal Pentecostal and her sermon was on the need to link, as she termed it, Justice and the Glory. A frequent criticism, or perhaps stereotype, of those with a Pentecostal persuasion is that they ignore issues of justice and peace as they pursue experiences of ecstasy. She put it back on us General Synod delegates and visitors that similarly, a frequent criticism, or perhaps stereotype, of those with a liberal persuasion is that they ignore joy, or as she termed it "glory," as they pursue justice and peace.

She has a real point. Maybe it's because we misunderstand joy. Joy isn't being delusional about the world's problems. Joy is being so enthused that you can't ignore them. I wanted to explore this misunderstanding or misappropriation of joy a little more, so I started searching for some definitions.

Billy Kangas writes a blog called *Orant: Theology for Sojourners: A Stumbling Examination of What it Means to Follow Jesus*. His blog on Thursday was entitled Joy to the World. He wrote that "here in the United States, we are constantly manipulated by forces around us to seek joy in what we don't have. Society tells us true joy lies in the materialism propounded by the barrage of advertisements around us." This is not a new insight for us. And we know there is certainly nothing like Christmas ads begging to fill our nostalgic needs – and heighten our expectations – for joy. Buy a diamond journey necklace as a gift to rekindle those special feelings. As we seek a more authentic joy,

Kangas continues, "I am often filled with joy, for example, when I see my family," but this doesn't "guarantee joy. Family can be painful." He calls joy "an elusive shadow." That seems so deep. But I didn't get it. So, I had to keep searching.

I went to Wikipedia.com to find their definitions of joy. Usually Wikipedia has pages and pages about the various topics it covers so I expected a variety of opinions. Joy had a whole two lines. And fulfilling the warning that Wikipedia definitions aren't necessarily right, those two lines about joy weren't exactly on target. They defined joy as "extreme cheerfulness" and, secondly, "a feeling of happiness." If I may be so bold, that's wimpy, and wrong. Joy is not about being cheery, extreme or not. I still didn't have my answer.

I went to the Feminist Dictionary of Theologies, one of my favorite sources for information, but joy wasn't even listed. So much for stereotypes! Then I went to Webster's New World. Their definition started with a familiar "very glad feeling" or "anything causing such feeling." I thought, "doesn't anyone get it?" An elusive shadow? Extreme cheerfulness? But Webster's third line moved much closer: "Joy is the expression or showing of such feeling." Joy involves showing it.

But, taking all these things into consideration, can I define joy any better? Can joy even have a definition? Well, we have to start with, joy is more about something you know in your gut

Sermons from Park Hill: December 16, 2007

than what you can describe. It is something you can't contain.

At that same General Synod in Atlanta, an overwhelming 80% of the 1,000 delegates declared their belief in marriage equality – that the unions of gay and lesbian couples are of the same nature as heterosexual unions. As I watched all those delegates raise their green voting cards, I felt such a swelling of pride in our denomination.

But then, as our General Minister and President, John Thomas, led us in prayer, my pride turned into something that caused me to weep, and then to cry, and then to ball uncontrollably. That's not something I do easily. But that was true joy. I wasn't very happy or extremely cheerful. It wasn't a feeling of victory for a deeply felt cause; it was an experience of transcendence. I was overwhelmed with gratitude because I felt in that huge convention center that God was truly present. And I couldn't contain my joy.

Psalm 16 says to God, "you fill me with joy in your presence." And God, I could feel, was there. God was the source of that amazing overflowing experience. Joy is found in God's presence. All the wonderful joy that we read this morning expressed in Isaiah 35 began with "God will come." *Then*, everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, the blind shall see, the lame shall leap, the speechless will sing for joy... Joy begins in the presence of God.

But, then comes the evidence, or not. As I said, true joy cannot be contained. Webster's made the surprisingly fine theological point that joy is showing it. It should make a difference; it should proceed out from us. People should be able to recognize it because our joy is spilling onto them. They should say, "I want some of that." If you want to start a movement that will change the world, or grow a church, start by *living* how you've been changed. People don't just want a story, but what's the evidence? Can you see it? Again, joy isn't being delusional about the world's problems. Joy is being so enthused that you can't ignore them.

I make this connection through the gospel of Matthew. John the Baptist sent his disciples to go and ask Jesus – "Are you the one?" "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John and his disciples had been discussing amongst themselves: "Is this really the Messiah?" Chronologically this doesn't quite make sense. Jesus had already been baptized by John in the Jordan, and John had seen the heavens open and the Spirit descend like a dove – and a voice from heaven declare, "This is my Beloved. Listen to him." John even declared he's not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals.

So why is John now questioning whether Jesus is the one? Well, maybe because John's in prison. And with too much time on our hands, we can question all kinds of things we were

Sermons from Park Hill: December 16, 2007

sure about before. And, it's unfair that John is in prison. We learn later in Matthew that King Herod arrested John because Herod thought John was playing around with his sister-in-law. Kind of hard to believe, I think, since John wasn't that much of a catch – wearing camel hair, eating bugs for dinner... But anyway, John is feeling forgotten, haunted by growing doubts. Is he really the one we've been waiting for?

Or, it could be that John didn't *like* the kind of Messiah that Jesus was turning out to be. Charles Cousar thinks that because John was a preacher of fire and brimstone, full of sermons to repent, denouncing people's sins, that he was expecting the Messiah to bring in the final judgment – putting the axe to the roots and burning every tree that does not bear fruit. What kind of messiah preaches in synagogues, heals people of disease, and forgives people of their sin? Therefore John isn't doubting because he's depressed sitting in prison. Cousar suggests John is doubting because he doesn't like the message of Jesus. It's way too full of grace and love.

So, because he is not the kind of Messiah John and his disciples hoped for, they ask, "Is this the one?" We know there were others, including one of the 12 disciples, who were zealots and wanted Jesus to overthrow the Roman Empire. They were bitterly disappointed when he didn't. But, Jesus was a different kind of messiah than that. The evidence was not in violent overthrow but in God's healing presence, and then, restoring people to their health and homeland.

When Jesus answered John's question, he placed himself squarely in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. "Are you the One?" Well, tell them to simply report back to John what they have seen and heard: the blind have received their sight, the lame are walking, lepers are clean again, the poor are hearing good news... This may not have been what John wanted, but it is exactly the kind of thing the prophet Isaiah said would take place when God comes, when God is present with them: joy will come, change will occur. His name Emmanuel, you'll remember is "God is with us." Joy is God's presence felt powerfully.

Joy cannot be faked or manufactured. It swells up from within. It is being in the presence of God, and *then...* The song does say, after all, joy *to* the world. What is joy doing through you? With all the problems in the world, perhaps liberals should embrace joy more enthusiastically, less suspiciously, because there's a lot of work to be done, a lot of needs to be met, a lot of changes to be made for the sake of peace. Don't be afraid of joy. The world doesn't need more misery.

A final note: I was happy to find in my searching that there is no joy.com, but there is a joy.org. And it's an organization that cares for women and children around the globe! That's evidence that they get what joy's about.