

Finding the joy

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A mighty roar, like the rush of the wind, pulsed through the place – people of many nationalities speaking many languages, whistling, clapping, on their feet, **bursting with joy**, and everyone there for the same purpose – to witness a loved one walking across the bright lights of the stage, and accept their GED diploma.

I don't think there was an empty seat in the whole theater.

There was so much to cheer for.

We were already ecstatic, the dozen of us from Mayflower Church who had come to cheer for our friend, Philemon. We were members of the Immigration Team, and I, their Associate Minister, supporting asylum seekers through a partnership with local human rights agencies. Philemon was a young man from Rwanda who had miraculously made his way to Minnesota with no support system or cultural community waiting for him, and he lived in a shelter for months until a new living arrangement could be found through the church. We had accompanied Philemon in the struggles to navigate ALL the systems, to get basic needs covered while he was ineligible for public assistance, and simply become part of a community again. Philemon's GED graduation represented a milestone in his journey that was by this time shared by the entire church.

So, the joy we felt only multiplied upon arriving at the Capri Theater in North Minneapolis and seeing that everybody there was as happy as we were, and not afraid to show it.

For those of us accustomed to solemn (and long) graduation ceremonies, this felt like we'd been lifted out of our seats by the Holy Spirit. **There was no stern announcement asking us to hold our polite clapping til the end, when all the names had been read** – it would have been pointless. The applause and standing ovations started as soon as the graduates began to process and continued almost the whole time.

Our noisemaking only paused for poignant speeches by school board members and personal stories of some of the graduates themselves. **They shared about the hard work of earning a diploma later in life.** Some named the obstacles that delayed this day

for them, and other lessons that had to be learned first. Sobriety, parenting young, taking charge of their choices and believing that they could succeed.

Every graduate on that stage had a powerful story. **The feeling of joy** in that noisy and spirit-filled room is hard to describe – you just had to be there. Or... maybe you'd like to try it?

Would someone shout out the name of a graduate in your life – and the rest of us here in the sanctuary and in our living rooms at home are going to stomp and clap for your loved one... Who's got one? Make some noise? Another one? **I'd like to finally clap for ALL the students and their teachers and school staff and faith formation directors who have made it through this year!!**

How did that feel? Good to be together in this space, and cyberspace – I hope the neighbors could hear our joy!...

To this day, I cannot read the scripture from Acts, and the description of the crowd swept up in the Spirit, without recalling Philemon's graduation in North Minneapolis. Could that be what they were feeling? **Uncontrollable joy?**

People had gathered in the holy city from many countries to celebrate the festival of Shavuot, which Christians now call Pentecost. Everybody in that place had a story. It meant something specific to be a Jew from Libya, or Mesopotamia, Arabia, or Rome. **It meant something to live there as a religious minority, taking on the language of those countries**, and it meant something to make the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem.

In that tongues-of-fire moment, the people, who have traveled many roads to this place, are bewildered, astonished; some suspicious, sarcastic. **They are confused above all by the strange miracle of suddenly being able to understand and be understood by people so different from them.**

As 21st century Progressive Christians, we too may feel weirded out and suspicious about this. Continue reading, and you'll hear Peter's sermon recounting a somewhat frightening passage from the prophet Joel, saying that the day of salvation will at first look like the end of the world. This sounds uncomfortable to our ears too, as it appears to be a mass conversion of Jewish people to the religion of Jesus, which couldn't be farther from how we understand our mission.

It's hard to wrap our minds around this but we must, to get into this story: **The Acts of the Apostles becomes our first book of church history, and yet every character in this Pentecost story is still Jewish.** It is many years before the Christian church understands itself as a religion distinct from Judaism rather than a movement within Judaism itself. Eventually, Paul and others will start wrestling with what it means to welcome people into the church who are *not* Jewish.

The story continues: Luke goes on to tell us that 3000 people were baptized, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles... All who believed were together, **and had all things in common**; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts and had the goodwill of all the people."

The miracle that begins in that room in Jerusalem seems less far-fetched to me since attending Philemon's graduation ceremony. **The followers of Jesus found that his power had not died after his body had left them.** His message of liberation – Good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed – was as powerful as ever. And they found that, together, they could do amazing things.

This cannot be read to mean that everyone becomes the same. The earliest vision of church is a cacophony of languages, voices, cultures.

It also means that our faith requires a collective responsibility for one another's well-being – within the church but also beyond it. In joining the community of the church, early Christians made a decision to belong to one another, and to serve the common good rather than the masters out in the world trying to claim their lives for other purposes.

They were committing themselves to the faith values of awe and gladness and generosity and joy. It must not have been easy when there were so many troubles in the world.

Does it not feel, lately, like *our* faith is being seriously put to the test?

In **Jerusalem**, and all of Palestine and Israel – where fear and control seek to have the last word and their quiet is as frightening as their noise.

In **Minneapolis** where shots strike the innocent and the trauma of police violence persists as we remember the anniversary of George Floyd's murder this very week.

At the borders of nations where people are faced with impossible choices.

In the **oceans and lands** of this earth and the people most at risk due to climate change.

In the work to end this cruel **pandemic**.

In the halls of power, in the streets of cities, in every level of government where everyday **people demand to be understood and to understand**.

We cry out in lament! Where is the good news for the vulnerable? Where is the liberation from the brutal systems of racism? Where is the healing? **Where is the joy?**

There is something I have learned – to be honest, something I am still trying to learn – from life in Jerusalem and life in Minneapolis, and honestly, from getting to know Philemon – who is soon to graduate from nursing school but still waiting for a decision to his asylum case after 5 years.

It is very hard to find the joy if we misunderstand where joy comes from.

It's a mistake to define "joy" as the absence of trouble, or the result of an easy life, just for the lucky few. **Joy is a gift of the Spirit that belongs to all of us – the world didn't give it and the world can't take it away.**

Our joy increases as we resist the separation and scarcity of the dominant culture.

That's what we feel in the wild applause of a hard-earned graduation. That's what we feel as hundreds of people stream into the Capitol or, these days, onto a zoom call to rise up for their neighbor's rights as much as their own. This is the joy we share as the church that follows Jesus.

This summer I invite you to join me and Larry Williams as we read or re-read the *Book of Joy* by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama of Tibet. We will hold space for our church community to sit with the paradox and blessing that joy exists in the midst of struggle.

Archbishop Tutu says, "**Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak.**" In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy,

we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have heartbreak without being broken.” *(The Book of Joy)*

Friends, as you prepare to go from this sanctuary into the week ahead, let us remember that we can, we MUST have joy even as we stay present to the hardship and heartbreak of life in these times. Take the words of Jesus wherever you go: **“These things I have spoken to you that my joy may remain in you, and your joy may be full. Love one another.”** *(John 15:11-14)* Amen.