

15 August 2021 Keys to Joy: Compassion

Luke 14:3-10, 22-24; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4;

It's mid-August and we are heading into the final weeks of our Summer of Joy at St. Andrew's. Why a whole summer on joy? In Paul's listing of spiritual gifts, joy is second only to love. Joy is not a frill; it's not an extra that we can do without. Joy is right at the heart of what it means to be fully alive. Yet joy has received little attention lately in the church or in scientific circles. The many challenges of the last 17 months have significantly curtailed our joy; and joy is the antidote to sorrow. So this summer we're proactively building back our capacity for authentic joy through the Spirit, who is our source of joy.

Up 'til now we've focused on nurturing a theology of joy—in the face of hardship and the seeming enemies of joy. Now we move to the first key to growing robust joy—compassion. Bringing joy to others is the fastest way to experience joy oneself. Shifting focus to another person and their needs, lessens my own pain and renews our joy.

I was telling you about experiencing joy in the African church. On a Canadian Foodgrains Study Tour some years ago I got to sleep on the ground in a tent in the Masai Lands of Kenya with three guys who were farmers from Alberta and Ontario. As we settled into our tent in this quiet place with no electricity for miles, the silence was suddenly broken by a bleating goat—the lead male goat, that eventually had all the other goats calling. Well those resourceful farmers were not going to be deprived of a good night sleep. Taking a roll of duct tape from a suitcase they climbed into the paddock and they taped that lead male goat's mouth shut. And sure enough all the others soon quieted down.

The next day I asked our hosts about the goats, and was told that they were actually the tithe's of the members of the church. Their offering plate didn't hold money, it held goats and cows. I was moved when I heard how even the poorest in this community self-sacrificed in order to bring an offering to God. These people, who periodically stood on the razor edge of survival, wanted to actively share in God's work. Not only was the minister paid in goats and cows, the poor were also fed from these goats and cows. In fact one year when a neighbouring area was especially hard hit by drought and on the verge of starvation—the Najile Presbyterian Church had been given a whole herd of goats. While I mused on the risk of giving away those goats—they, in their confidence in God had found in it to be pure joy. Bringing joy to others is the fastest way to experience joy oneself.

This is precisely what's described today in 2 Corinthians. One of the threads running through Paul's NT letters is his plea for an offering to help the church in Jerusalem. All around the Mediterranean Paul appeals for relief for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. However, because of the poverty of the Macedonian churches, Paul didn't ask them to contribute. The poverty, persecution and suffering of these Christians was just so extreme. Their fierce trials had pushed them to the limits, but did not close off their joy and compassion for the suffering of others. The Macedonian churches begged to be part of the compassionate giving, and once included gave, not merely what might have been reasonable, but sacrificed generously beyond their means—and counted it pure joy. Shifting focus to another person and their needs, lessens my own pain and renews our joy.

Compassion means to suffer with someone else. To empathize. To feel their pain. And then to bless them, to help them, to stand by them. Scripture tells us over and over again that God is deeply compassionate. Jesus' whole ministry is about the compassion of God, as Jesus actively comes down to suffer with us and bless us. Jesus, in today's Gospel stories—in answer to complaints about his joyful celebrations with sinners—highlights God's great compassion for those who have lost their way, failed, made mistakes, chosen the wrong paths. Helping these find their way home to God is what truly brings joy to the heart of God.

Many of us have lost our way during this pandemic. COVID has made us even more self-oriented. The periods of forced isolation have turned our focus and resources much more toward our own safety, security and personal needs. It has significantly isolated us from our neighbours and from being in-person as a community of faith. And that's not been good for us,

particularly when it comes to our spiritual and mental health. A psychiatric nurse in our city tells about her unit that is now constantly full to over-flowing, while the wait list of teens with mental health needs in emergency is never less than 10 kids waiting for a bed in some facility. Suicides and the statement, “I’m going to kill myself,” has been ever increasing, she says.

As the pandemic began, I recommitted myself to watching the nightly news. The stories of human pain and suffering I hear of every day make me sad. I feel empathy. But compassion requires more than that. Compassion is not just a sense of concern when we are confronted with another’s suffering; compassion is wanting what is best for the other person and feeling motivated to see that suffering relieved—we decide to do something. The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama puts it this way: if we see a person who is being crushed by a rock, the goal is not to get under the rock and feel what they are feeling; it is to help to remove the rock. This sounds like what brings Jesus joy.

Perhaps you’re thinking, ‘Well that’s fine and good, but I have enough problems of my own to deal with, let alone facing the suffering of others.’ Humans have a special brain, but this brain causes a lot of suffering when it simply thinks me, me, me, me. Yet a compassionate concern for others ‘well-being is a source of joy.’ When we think of alleviating other people’s suffering, even our own suffering is reduced.

Science tells us that when we help others, endorphins are released in our brain and we often experience the “helper’s high.” The same reward centers of the brain seem to light up when we are doing something compassionate—as when we think of chocolate. The warm feeling we get from helping others comes from the release of oxytocin, the same hormone that is released by lactating mothers. This hormone seems to have health benefits, including the reduction of inflammation in the cardiovascular system. Compassion literally makes our heart healthy and happy. Compassion also seems to be contagious. When we see others being compassionate, we are more likely to be compassionate.

Anthony Ray Hinton was wrongfully convicted in a 1985 murder trial in Birmingham, Alabama and was sentenced to death. He was held on the state’s [death row](#) for 28 years— before being released in 2015. He was understandably angry and heartbroken at how the American justice system had failed him. He says, “When no one believes a word you say, eventually you stop saying anything. I did not say good morning. I did not say good evening. I did not say a how-do-you-do to anyone. If the guards needed some information from me, I wrote it down on a piece of paper. I was angry. But going into the fourth year, I heard a man in the cell next to mine crying. The love and compassion I had received from my mother spoke through me and asked him what was wrong. He said he had just found out that his mother had passed away. I told him, ‘Look at it this way. Now you have someone in heaven who’s going to argue your case before God. ’And then I told him a joke, and he laughed. Suddenly my voice and my sense of humour were back. For twenty-six long years after that night, I tried to focus on other people’s problems, and every day I did, I would get to the end of the day and realize that I had not focused on my own.”

Hinton was able to bring love and compassion to a loveless place, and in doing so he was able to hold on to his joy in one of the most joyless places on the planet. While he was in prison, he watched fifty-four people, fifty-three men and one woman, walk by his cell on their way to the execution chamber. He got his fellow inmates to start banging their bars at five minutes before the execution to say to those who were being put to death, ‘We’re with you, we still love you right up to the end.’”

Bringing joy to others is the fastest way to experience joy oneself. Through compassion the Spirit opens us out to the spacious joy of recognizing our connection to God and each other, realizing that we are not alone or limited to our resources. It is this expansive place of communion that God uses for growing greater human life and flourishing. Who is God leading you to in compassionate service? What first step could you take? Each step will be toward greater joy.