

Pursuing Peace and Joy

Readings: John 2:1-11, Luke 4:16-21/Matthew 22:37-40

Several months ago I gave a sermon in our “Living as Peacemakers” series about pursuing peace with ourselves. I talked about why I believed it was important to speak about peace with self in the Church, mentioning that it’s important because (1) people matter, you matter. (2) That healthier people can create a healthier church. And (3) that I strongly believe love for self and love for others is tied intimately together pointing to Jesus’ words: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:37-40).

I wanted to come back to this idea of peace with ourselves once more and talk about it in terms of practically caring for ourselves, what some call self-care. But I’m talking about practices that can contribute to a sense of peace, hope, joy, and contentment in ourselves which can then flow out of us into the world.

To guide this discussion, I want to look at the life of Jesus but I want to do so with an emphasis on: what was Jesus’ life like as a human on this earth day-to-day. What were some of ordinary routines and practices that contributed to his well-being and brought joy and peace to his life? And what can we glean from this? Because yes, Jesus is the Christ, and during Their earthly life gave us a glimpse into the mind and heart of God and taught us extraordinary things, did extraordinary things and our focus tends to be there, on the revolutionary and miraculous and divine. But he also did very ordinary things, walking, talking, enjoying meals. What are some of those things from Jesus’ earthly life that can speak to our daily routines and impart a measure of peace and joy?

Sometimes these are found in the details and in the in-between portions of Scripture, the verses between the teachings and miracles that we typically focus on. Sometimes it may come from reading between the lines, making some educated guesses based on what is written or what we know of the context Jesus was in. But I want to reflect on some of these things and how this can speak to our lives today as we strive to live as peacemakers in our context. Because without caring for ourselves, it becomes more difficult to care for others and to work for peace in our homes and communities and nations and world, and it becomes more difficult to experience God as peace.

Jesus’ Life

So as I was reflecting on Jesus’ earthly life and skimming through the Gospel of Matthew, a number of things stuck out to me and I’ve organized them into 4 categories of routine practices that I believe contributed to an experience of peace, contentment, joy, in Jesus during his earthly life. These categories are: Spirituality (practices that strengthen that connection with the Sacred, with the capital ‘S’ Something beyond the self), Relationships, Participation in Meaningful work (and here I don’t mean paid work necessarily), and then pleasure practices/joy practices.

1. Spirituality

I want first to distinguish spirituality and religion a little bit. Psychologist and professor Kenneth Pargament (Bowling Green State University) talks about spirituality being a ‘search for the sacred’ and religion as that search but which “occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality.” ([Defining Religion and Spirituality](#)). So there is obviously overlap here but I see

spirituality as more about the inner experience of a person and religion as more about the external structures, institutions, practices that are designed to help encourage spirituality in a person.

And so it comes as no surprise that religious and spiritual practices were part of Jesus' earthly life. We see him getting baptized (Mt. 3:13-17), this spiritual practice representing beginning a new life (Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, p. 1686). We see him engage in fasting (Mt. 4:1-10), a spiritual practice designed to encourage connection with the Divine. He studied and engaged with the Scriptures (Lk. 2:46-47). He went to synagogues to listen, to teach, to pray (Mt. 4:23). And he would retreat into solitude to pray (Mk. 1:35, Mt. 14:23). All of these practices gave him a rich spiritual life and deep connection with God, with the Sacred. This, I would argue, helped cultivate deeper peace that could help enable Jesus to allow that peace and joy to flow through him into the world through his words and actions. Which brings me to the second category I see.

2. Involvement in Meaningful Work

So when I speak of work here I am not speaking of a paid job but just of being involved in things that were meaningful to them and contributed to blessing people and the world, to bringing justice and setting things right. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus goes to a synagogue and uses words from the prophet Isaiah to describe the type of work that would define his public life, saying, **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** (Lk. 4:18-19). This is what Jesus was committed to being part of: proclaiming good news, bringing freedom from oppression, bringing healing, proclaiming God's favor.

And so Jesus begins his public life and we see numerous examples of him doing these things. We see him particularly drawn to people who were disenfranchised, those on the outside looking in, in society at the time: tax collectors, 'sinners', women and children, the sick and 'unclean'. And we read a brief summary of his work in Matthew 9:35-36: **"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."**

Jesus was invested in meaningful work, blessing others and the world. And I think in Jesus we can see what happens in each of us. That, again, love for self and others is tied together like this infinity loop of love. We invest in ourselves which leads us to invest in others, which further contributes to our own blessing and peace which can again flow through us to others and around and around it goes. So I would imagine that Jesus' investing in others could have brought more peace and joy to him even as it did to those he had contact with. Which brings me to the third category I'll mention which is...

3. Relationships

Human beings are relational creatures. Some require more relational time than others but every human being is made for some level of relationship. We do not exist in isolation. And neither did Jesus. He valued and was involved in deep relationships. He chose to have a number of people he intimately shared life with day by day. He chose to have disciples with him, travel with him, eat with him. And I want to mention that I don't just mean the 12 male disciples who receive most of the attention in the Scriptures (not surprising in a patriarchal culture). There were others as well and Luke explicitly

mentions a number of women who travelled with this group. (In extra-biblical texts like the Gospel of Mary, we even see Mary Magdalene described as perhaps Jesus' closest disciple). And beyond these deeper relationships we also see Jesus regularly sitting, talking, eating with others including those deemed 'outsiders' like tax collectors and 'sinners' (Matt. 9:10-11) *and* those deemed 'insiders' like the Pharisees (Lk. 7:36). Relationship and blessing people was central.

Now, I'm going to go beyond the text here a bit because the narrative we see in the Gospels about Jesus' earthly life focuses on what I would call the highlights: the miracles, the counter-cultural teachings, and of course, his death and resurrection. But there is a lot of unaccounted-for time in the narratives. A lot of in-between times that don't get described. But I wonder, given he was in this travelling group, sharing life intimately with these friends, if some of the times and days we don't hear about were spent simply in times of rest, relaxing with these friends, talking and enjoying their company, maybe fishing together. Of course, I don't know this for sure, we're not told explicitly so it's simply a guess. But maybe an educated guess because I think there are places in Scripture where we see types of ordinary joys like these being referenced in Jesus' life. Which brings me to the last section I want to mention: Pleasure or Joy Practices.

4. Pleasure practices/Joy practices

By this I simply mean those ordinary and regular things we can do that add joy to life. So some of these things that I recognize as part of Jesus' earthly life include:

- Enjoying and appreciating nature.

Many of Jesus' teachings and parables involve looking deeply at nature and the wisdom we can glean from how the natural world works. I think it shows that Jesus spent time contemplating nature, looking deeply, appreciating it, breathing it in. And he lived in a beautiful place geographically it would seem. The author of a book entitled "Jesus and the Pleasures", J. Christian Wilson says, "**The first time I visited the Sea of Galilee was in 1988. I was immediately struck with the natural beauty of the place.**" (p. 12). He describes flowers blooming, green hillsides, bougainvillea blossoms, being able to see the snow-capped Mount Hermon in the distance on a clear day (p. 12) and then says, "**It was a place of rare beauty, a place of simple pleasure. It was a place whose beauty would bring anyone closer to nature**" (p. 12).

Based on Jesus' knowledge of the natural world and the location he lived in, my guess is that Jesus received a certain degree of joy and peace from appreciating the beauty of nature.

- Humor

How about humor? Can you picture Jesus laughing or telling a joke? For many it can be hard to do yet others argue that this was indeed part of Jesus' repertoire. Author Elton Trueblood recounts when his eyes were opened to the possibility of humor in Jesus' teachings and earthly life. He tells the story of reading Matthew 7 to his 4-year-old son who, upon hearing about someone being concerned about a splinter in the eye of another all the while having a log in their own eye, burst out laughing. It was a ridiculous image. To this 4-year-old, this was clearly funny.

While I struggle to know for sure where Jesus was employing humor in his words (humor is often contextual), there are several places where we can easily see it if we're looking. Beyond the splinter and

log in the eye image, we can think of Matt. 23:24 where Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for focusing on minute details of the law rather than the important values of justice and peace and says, "You filter out an ant but swallow a camel." Or I think of Jesus walking alongside the disciples on the Road to Emmaus where it seems to me that Jesus plays dumb so-to-speak, pretending he doesn't know about what happened with the crucifixion and resurrection before revealing himself to them. I wonder if there is more humor in Jesus than we often acknowledge or realize. In any regard, humor, laughter, is one of those blessings in life that can contribute to our experience of God's joy and peace.

- **Good food and drink and times of partying.**

And lastly I'll mention the enjoyment of good food and drink. There are a couple very interesting short passages in Scripture I want to mention here. The first comes in John 2 which is mentioned as the first of Jesus' miracles. Here, Jesus, his mother, and his disciples had been invited to a wedding and were there for the feast, the party. It had evidently been going on for a while because they are now out of wine, meaning a lot had been consumed already. And we're told Jesus then saw 6 stone water jars, each holding 20-30 gallons, had them filled with water, that he then turned to wine. And not just any wine, we're told that the normal custom was to serve the good wine first and then the cheap stuff after everyone had already drunk too much...but the wine Jesus made was apparently the best. Christian Wilson said about this miracle that it "**is the only miracle of Jesus' that could be described strictly as a pleasure miracle.**" (p. 35), and later "**He simply enabled the people to have a great time. That is what a celebration is for.**" (p. 39). It's a fascinating story we tend not to spend much time on.

And speaking of wedding feasts, in Matthew 22 we see that this is the image Jesus gives us for the kingdom of heaven, saying it is like a wedding feast, it is a lavish party. And in Matthew 11 we see Jesus saying this: "**John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man [Jesus] came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'**" (Mt. 11:18-19). Jesus' critics pronounced him a glutton and drunkard because of the company he kept and how different his lifestyle was in some ways, from the ascetic life of John the Baptist. Of course we want to keep in mind this accusation is coming from Jesus' critics, but it is interesting that this is their critique and it's worth reflecting on. Might enjoying a good party, a good drink, good food, be a part of Jesus' earthly life we don't consider enough?

Summary and Conclusion

We speak about many facets of Jesus. We know them as Savior, Redeemer, Teacher, Healer, Source of all good (of love and joy and peace), as God-Made-Flesh. But I think more attention can be given to that 'Flesh' part, the humanness of Jesus and the very earthly practices that were evidenced in his life. When we pay attention to some of those details we see the spiritual practices he engaged in that developed in him a rich spiritual connection and wisdom. We see him pouring himself into meaningful work, living as a blessing to others. We see him building deep, rich relationships. And we see him enjoying the many blessings our world is filled with such as beautiful nature, laughter and humor, good food and drink and times of partying with friends and family.

And if you are like me, you may attribute the love and joy and peace that emanated from Jesus simply to the fact that they were *God-made-flesh*, emphasizing that divine nature. But I wonder if there is more we can learn from Jesus when it comes to simply being human and finding ways to fill our cups with that

love, joy, and peace that are the fruits of the Spirit, so that it can then overflow into the lives of those we come in contact with.

So for us, whether it is investing in life-giving spiritual practices (be they traditional or untraditional) that connect you to the Sacred, or finding ways to be involved in paid or volunteer work that provides meaning for you and blessing to the world, or investing in deepening and enriching relationships, or taking time to dwell in nature, finding ways to enjoy laughter and humor, or finding ways to celebrate and party with good people, good food, good drinks...Whatever it is, I believe that finding ways to fill your cup, finding ways to increase your experience of love, joy, and peace is vital if we are to live out our calling as ambassadors of the Source of love and joy and peace, ambassadors of the Christ.

So as you go about embracing the short summer we get here in Saskatchewan my encouragement this morning to each of you is to ask yourself: How can I practice joy both for my own sake and also so I have more to give to others?

Benediction:

As you go from this place, may you feel the permission to richly enjoy the many good gifts Creator has lavished on us. May you find what makes you smile and feel God smiling upon you as you do. May you be brought into an ever-deepening experience of the Peace and Joy of God. Amen.