

A PATH TO JOY

There is a big difference between Happiness and Joy.

A lot of little things can make a person happy, and those things tend to be ephemeral – short lived.

A nice Christmas gift can make a child happy, for most of Christmas day.

A raise or a promotion or good weather during harvest can make a person happy,.... for a while.

A good cup of coffee in the morning makes me happy.

Just as when the Leafs win a game,.... but I know that won't last.

I can remember when a new song could make me happy, remember those days? Yet.... it only lasted for a little while, and then we were ready for another new good song to come along to make us happy again.

It's nice to be happy, and we humans do lots of things to bring happiness, such as making melt in your mouth cheese cake with a smooth Swiss chocolate topping. or butter tarts... :)

Being happy is in nice..... in it's limited context; however, happiness should not be confused with JOY.

I think joy is a state of being in / a sense of.... fullness / completeness that is aware of the "Big Picture."

I think Joy is the summation or the combination of a number of things coming together, such as fulfillment, satisfaction, contentment, release.... and love, ...especially love ... with the flavour of Grace.

When I think of joy, I picture a parent struggling hard to provide for a family. In the day to day, there may not be much happiness, yet the twinkle of grateful little eyes reinforces the awareness of a purpose being fulfilled with love – Joy.

Another example of Joy is discovering the deep love that is the source of grace, and receiving that Grace.

Such as, a child quivering with guilt, preparing for well deserved punishment, but instead receives a forgiving embrace with reassuring words that grant direction and awareness.

There are two Old Testament passages today, we read only from Zephaniah; the other was from Isaiah 12:2-6. Both passages contain a similar message. They present a gracious God encountering sinful people who have ignored God and hurt God with their indifference.

In both passages, the people are flinching [] for the expectant wrath of God,.... yet... discover the delightful release that comes from being forgiven and offered grace.

Listen to Isaiah 12:1 –

“...I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.”

With arm extended and flexing for the punishing blow, revenge is overcome by love. There is restraint and... More.... –comfort is given.
– Comfort instead of punishment.

I am flummoxed – baffled / puzzled by the frequency I am asked this question by “Good” church going Christians, “What else could we do after 9/11; we just couldn’t do nothing?”

I realize we all selectively read the Bible to affirm our own beliefs, but I’m amazed that so many people can’t recall the countless examples and mandates, in the Bible, for doing grace instead of vengeance.

Over and over again, God was gracious to his rebellious children.
And, Jesus was very clear about how to treat our enemies, and Jesus didn’t create peacemaking. Proverbs 25:21 states, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink.....” Proverbs 15:1 reads, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger.”

Yet,.... after 9/11, the call to be gracious to the terrorists and to feed those hiding in the Bora Bora mountains of Afghanistan was.... less than a whimper.
Today, the call for doing peace isn’t much louder.

I do wonder what judgment our judgment invites?

This past week, President Obama tried defend the war in Afghanistan, my reaction prompted more questions directed my way, asking “what else can we do?”

Perhaps, we could follow Christ’s example????

Not only is the way of peace, Christ’s way, it also makes senses!

The Soviets and Americans spent 10 years teaching the Afghans how to do war, and now NATO has been at it since 2001.

Eventually, we’ll conclude that all they know is war, and we’ll give up.

Being gracious and feeding our enemies may NOT bring peace, but doing war definitely will not work.

We tend to think in terms of brute force or simple math; it is difficult to transcend the base / the physical realm.

Most humans are afraid, distrustful and suspicious of grace.

I think we need more joy in the world.

I think Joyful people are less inclined to violence and destruction.

I think confidence and contentment are part of the essence of joy.

Yet, it is hard to make that leap..... to engage at a higher level.

It is hard to fly without letting go of the ground.

In Zephaniah's time, the people understood collective guilt AND collective punishment. The prophets had warned them to change their ways..... or else. They knew God was frustrated and angry,... but then Zephaniah..... reminded them that God is a God of love and grace. God had forgiven them; they would not be destroyed.

In those days, destruction was waiting on the border, and so the release of fear / the absence of punishment also implied that God would protect them from their enemies. They assumed they would not be overrun and conquered. For them, Grace was joyous, and it felt like they were given a Superhero to protect them.

Zephaniah recognizes that attitude in verse 17, where it states, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, *a warrior* who gives victory.

A "Warrior"..... oh NO! This is going to be hard for us Mennonites to swallow. Yet, before we get our erasures out, let us read on....

Their vision of this Superhero defender... was not like our Superman in tights who smashes his opponents with brute force.

Far from it:

Zephaniah was presenting a "Warrior of love". This "Messianic" figure was victorious with the Power of Love and justice.

A warrior who doesn't kill or do destruction, but instead focusses on justice and bringing people home. Interesting?

The Bible is very interesting..... when we read it.

For years, I assumed the gadfly John the Baptist went around warning people to beg for forgiveness because JESUS was coming.

He called for repentance, and I just thought that meant being ashamed of all the bad things a person did and asking for forgiveness.

I really didn't understand repentance, and I viewed God as unrelentingly judgmental, even mean.

When I was young, I understood that God couldn't forgive unless paid/ compensated, and that was the reason for Jesus. Jesus life paid off God.

It all made sense. A person would cash in Jesus, then God was satisfied, and handed out a ticket for the pearly gates.

And, of course, people were given the Holy Spirit who would make us happy, kind to others and bold to convert the heathen, and life would be great.

Granted that view is really primitive and simplistic, but I was young, then.

I really didn't read the Bible with an open mind and research the details.

And, I wondered.... where the magic was in life.

I said the right things, but life was not so grand.... and joy was often just out of reach.

I've since learned that repentance means much more than regretting the past and asking for forgiveness.

The will / the soul / one's personal essence is involved in true repentance, because Repentance means also "Changing Direction."

Repentance require new, different behaviour – behaviour that matches our words of confession,... and more.

John the Baptist said, in verse 8 of Luke 3,
"Bear **fruits** / [Results–plural... that are].....worthy of repentance."

And, I just thought repentance meant saying, "I'm sorry."
No wonder it all felt so shallow.

John went on by warning his audience to not think that their heritage will help them at all. He said, It is NOT enough to claim to be a pacifist, speak low German and donate loose change to MCC.

His audience was flabbergasted, and asked, "What then should we do?"

*>Actually, I don't think this was in my Bible until I became a Mennonite. I'm pretty sure all John the Baptist proclaimed with for us to beg for forgiveness.
But, I can't deny it. It's in there now.*

John said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

No,..... the more I think about it, I'm sure this part has been added since my father died. My father read the Bible very carefully, and he was strongly opposed to social justice and across the board equalization.

No.... this must be new..... Yet, it's in my Bible now. ???

Those listening were surprised too, and asked John for more details, and John told each how to do justice and how to share their bounty with the less fortunate.

And then,.... John the Baptist revealed that he was a man of his culture too, when he forecasted / predicted what would happen when the Messiah arrived on the scene.

John spiced his message with a touch of fear by warning the people to watch out for Jesus.... who would come as a judge, yet..... LUKE, the writer, called this message the Good News.

I believe it is Good News... because even though God could have played the hanging Judge, and Jesus could have been the avenging angel, God chose grace!

John the Baptist did his part faithfully. He prepared the way. He told people to be ready by REPENTING / by living the life God desires that we live. Yet, one piece was missing – Jesus the living Grace of God.

I don't think John was capable of fully grasping Good News without the presence of Jesus. How can we understand grace, until we accept it? I think John the Baptist began to see when he baptized Jesus, an act of repentance that didn't make sense in Jesus case unless.... God was sharing our journey, instead of demanding a life.

Maybe the Good News is more than being forgiven of our sins and gaining a reprieve from punishment.....and, that in itself is great news.

Maybe the Good News is discovering that the journey of following Christ is as noted in Micah 6: it is doing justice and love WITH God.

I do believe..... Immanuel..... God is with us.

There is NO fire and brimstone for us because of God's grace... God is with us. We just have to open up to that / receive it / engage in the grace.... be the salvation.

Now, Paul's message in Philippians now makes sense. For even though Paul was chained in prison, he was rejoicing. Paul had joy, in spite of his physical situation.

Reading the other New Testament text, Phil. 4:4-7, and picture Paul writing this while chained up in a Roman prison:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The LORD is near!!!!
Do NOT worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
And,.... the peace of God... which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice God is Near. God is with us.

Our theology is much better than the theology those evangelists used to scare us with, yet.... even though we proclaim the Good News, ... we are having trouble grasping JOY in our lives.

I wonder why that is? ???????

What part is missing?

Perhaps we don't fully appreciate grace??

Do we deserve the love of God?
Do we deserve a loving and gracious Jesus?