

Pillars of Joy: Humor **Genesis 18:9-14; 21:1-6**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
April 11, 2021

In the spring of 2015, two extraordinary men spent five days together talking about one thing: joy - or more specifically, how we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering. Archbishop Desmond Tutu visited the home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India with the hope that, with the help of author Douglas Abrams, they might produce a gift for those who wished to receive it - a book entitled *The Book of Joy*.

Last weekend, we celebrated Easter - the most joyous occasion in the Christian year. Yet, with all that is happening in the world, I fear the joy of Easter may quickly fade for us. So, for the next several weeks, we're going to spend some time learning from these two deeply spiritual and very joyful world leaders about how we can find joy and nurture it within ourselves.

The Book of Joy is divided into three topics - the Nature of Joy, Obstacles to Joy, and Pillars of Joy. I think in the last year we've all become painfully aware of some of the obstacles to joy that the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama talk about - fear, stress, anxiety, frustration, anger, sadness, grief, despair, loneliness, envy, suffering, adversity, illness and fear of death. Those emotions have been woven into our daily lives as we've made our way through the global pandemic. We also just spent several weeks exploring some of them during our Lenten Wilderness sermon series.

So, rather than focus on that part of the book, I've decided instead to spend this time exploring with you the eight Pillars of Joy. What makes for a joyful life? What can we learn from these two men who have seen so much violence and hatred and suffering and yet literally radiate joy?

First let's talk a little bit about what the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu mean when they speak of joy. After all, emotions researcher Paul Ekman points out that joy may be associated with all sorts of feelings - pleasure, amusement, contentment, excitement, relief, wonder, ecstasy, exultation, pride, and gratitude. Yet, the joy that the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu speak about - and exude - is something much more enduring than any one of those - it is joy as a way of being.

"Joy" the Archbishop says, "is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not...Joy subsumes happiness. Joy is the far greater thing." His Holiness the Dalai Lama continues this theme. "Everyone seeks happiness, joyfulness, but from outside - from money, from power, from big car, from big house. Most people never pay much attention to the ultimate source of a happy life, which is inside, not outside".

According to Buddhist teaching, joy is our essential nature. In Christian tradition, we understand that God created us to experience deep joy. Because joy comes from within, joy is something we can cultivate, but how? That is where the eight pillars of joy come in. According to Douglas Abrams, "There are eight positive qualities that allow us to experience more

joy.” They are the foundation of lasting joy. Four are qualities of the mind and four are qualities of the heart. We’re going to start with one that might take you by surprise. The first pillar of joy we’re going to talk about is humor.

When you read *The Book of Joy*, you can’t help but notice how often Douglas Abrams describes Archbishop Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama laughing. In fact, Abrams says, “They and everyone around them were constantly guffawing, chortling, giggling, and belly laughing throughout the week, as moments of great levity were spliced together with moments of profundity and sanctity.”

When asked to talk about the role of humor and laughter in cultivating joy, the Dalai Lama responded, “It is much better when there is not too much seriousness. Laughter, joking is much better. Then we can be completely relaxed...People who are always laughing have a sense of abandon and ease.” You may have experienced this yourself. There is nothing like a good belly laugh to release stress and lift our mood and recent research confirms this. An online article from the Mayo Clinic explains that a good laugh stimulates our organs, relieves stress, improves our immune systems, relieves pain, and elevates mood.

One reason the Archbishop sees humor as a pillar of joy is because it diffuses tension. He tells stories of using humor during political rallies in South Africa. “We found that one of the best ways of helping our people direct their energies in positive directions was laughter. Telling a joke, even at our expense, was such a wonderful flip to our morale...We tend to want to blow ourselves up, inflate ourselves because most of us have tended to have a poor self-image. When you’re in a situation such as the one in South Africa where you were discriminated against, it was very easy to lose your sense of self and humor seems to do something for people. Humor certainly did one good thing: it deflated, defused a particularly tense situation”.

Archbishop Tutu also speaks of the importance of laughing at ourselves. When we can see our own foibles and laugh at them, we let go of perfectionism and embrace humility. This also helps us to connect with others. Humor draws people together. “You know, it’s so good to see the ridiculous in us all, really...This kind of humor says, ‘Come stand next to me and let’s laugh at me together, then we can laugh at you together. It does not belittle either of us but uplifts us, allows us to recognize and laugh about our shared humanity, about our shared vulnerabilities, our shared frailties. Life is hard, you know, and laughter is how we come to terms with all the ironies and cruelties and uncertainties that we face.”

Our scripture reading today is a beautiful example of laughing at the ridiculous, the ironies and uncertainties. Let me set the scene for you. Abraham is sitting in the doorway to his tent one hot afternoon when suddenly three men appear. We later learn that the men are angels. Abraham sees the travelers and offers them a meal and a safe place to sit and rest. When they finish eating, one of them asks Abraham where his wife, Sarah, is. We can imagine Sarah listening to their conversation, ear pressed up to the side of the tent. Then, the angel says, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Now, Sarah and Abraham were old at this point - 89 and 99 respectively. Sarah had been barren her whole life. In a culture in which women’s value is measured by the children they birth, Sarah has been denied the joy of having children and the respect that is given to mothers. And

now she's 89 years old! Can you imagine? So, what does Sarah do? She laughs! She laughs at the absurdity and the irony that now, when she is 89 years old, she is finally going to have a baby. But I also think she laughs in wonder, amusement, and joy.

When Sarah does give birth to a son, they name him Isaac, which means "He laughs", and Sarah says, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." In her joy, she invites others to laugh with her - to share in her wonderment at how God often works in such surprising but beautiful ways in our lives.

So, if humor is a pillar of joy, how do we nurture it within ourselves? Many of us don't think of ourselves as especially funny. In fact, we see having a good sense of humor as an inborn quality like being musical or good at languages. Yet, we can learn to seek out and appreciate things that make us laugh. The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu both attribute their laughter to their spiritual practice. They suggest spending time in prayer or meditation focusing on something about you that is really quite funny. For example, the Dalai Lama laughs at his limited English and the Archbishop laughs about his big nose. What can you laugh at about yourself? Can you invite others to laugh with you?

You might also practice being amused by the day-to-day challenges life hands you. Instead of getting angry when you're stuck in a long line, try to pull back from the situation and consider what is funny about it. We can choose to find the humor in almost any situation.

Of course, you can also surround yourself with people who make you laugh or watch television shows or movies that are funny. You can post comic strips on your refrigerator or dig up some old knock-knock jokes.

So often we think of our faith journey as something somber, serious, and silent. Yet, God created us to experience a wide range of emotion and to share those emotions in community. The Church has long understood the benefits of humor and laughter. In fact, I chose to start this series with humor as the first pillar of joy because of a long-standing tradition that comes from the Greek Orthodox Church. For centuries, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches have extended the celebration of Easter by declaring the Sunday after to be Holy Humor Sunday - a day of joy and laughter. The practice largely faded away, but is now experiencing a resurrection (ha, ha). Holy Humor Sunday worship services now happen across the denominations and may include the pastor dressing like a clown, the congregation telling jokes, balloons, and so on.

So, in that vein, let me share one of my favorite sources of humor - church bulletin bloopers. These are actual sentences printed in church bulletins.

1. The outreach committee has enlisted 25 visitors to make calls on people who are not afflicted with any church.
2. Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 to 8:30 pm. Please use the back door.
3. During the absence of our pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when J.F. Stubbs supplied our pulpit.
4. Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.
5. And finally, Don't let worry kill you off - let the Church help.

God created us for laughter. God created us for joy. Thanks be to God! Amen.