

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: Joy”
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Psalm 30; John 16:20-24

Our vocabulary word of faith today is Joy. Palm Sunday is a great time to talk about what Christians mean when they use the word joy because this is the day Jesus finally lets his disciples and followers express the joy that he has inspired in them. They have been told to remain silent after seeing Jesus perform miraculous healings and after he cast out evil spirits. They have been told to not tell anyone about Jesus’ teachings about inclusion and equity and justice. That must have been incredibly frustrating! Imagine having such good news and not being able to tell anyone!

Palm Sunday is the day Jesus does not hold them back. The time for silence has passed; the authorities know what Jesus is up to. Finally, the people are free to express their joy! After keeping it bottled up it must have been a powerful expression. John’s gospel gives us an exceptional example of what Christian joy is all about. John’s retelling places the joyous Palm Sunday parade as a direct reaction to Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life. The people have experienced a great loss and their pain has been turned to joy through the resurrection of a friend. But the miracle is also the cause of Jesus’ death. Once authorities hear about what Jesus did for Lazarus they turn against him and plot his demise. Joy and pain are close companions in John’s gospel.

Joy is in short supply in Jesus’ world, largely because the Pharisees and Roman authorities deal out joy like a drug. Their power depends on their control and careful dispersion of joy. The Pharisees and the Roman authorities are the ones who keep sorrow and trouble at bay. They keep out invaders and create order in society. They make sacrifices and keep God’s favor on the people. They create a barrier to keep sorrow and pain away so that the people have more joy. When these powers hear that Jesus is offering another access point to joy they become afraid and plot to get rid of the challenge of their joy monopoly.

After the joyous parade of palms in the streets Jesus reteaches the basics of God’s joy. He wants them to remember how God’s joy works because they will need to hold on to it for the painful days ahead. Jesus talks about grains needing to die and fall to the earth before they can grow and become what it was made to be – a giant, strong stalk of grain. Jesus teaches about the light shining in the darkness and how darkness is needed to see the light. He invites his betrayers to eat with him, welcoming the cause of his pain to sit next to him. He teaches repeatedly about existing in pain and struggle until we get to the passage I read today. You will weep, you will mourn, you will have pain, but your pain will turn to joy.

Jesus compares this process of pain turning to joy to a woman giving birth. There is pain, but when the child is born healthy, the woman no longer remembers the pain. It has turned to joy. Do you hear what Jesus is saying? The very thing causing the pain – the child – is what causes the joy. There is no substitution happening. The thing causing the pain is not taken away and a joyous thing put in its place. The child causes the pain and the child causes the joy. The pain is transformed into joy. Joy is not a substitute for pain; joy is the transformed state of pain.

When scripture talks about joy, there is always pain in the verses preceding it. Joy does not exist in scripture without pain. But the world takes the verses about joy and cuts out the parts about pain. The transformation is lost and we are left with substitutive joy. A concept that leads us to believe that joy and pain cannot exist together, that they are opposites. Substitutive joy is problematic. If every time we break something it is replaced with a shiny new thing, we become spoiled. And when we finally face a loss that cannot be replaced, we become desperate to find joy again. Substitutive joy tells us we must get rid of the pain to receive joy. We must cover our pain, dump our pain, before joy can take over our lives. If we think joy is a substitute for pain, then after a great loss we can try to cover our pain with other things. Material goods, other people, experiences, drugs. If we still feel pain, we keep trying to cover it up with joyful things.

The opioid epidemic is a result of substitutive joy. Pain is covered by the rush of a high, a rush that needs to get bigger and bigger to bring the same level of joy one had yesterday. In 2007 500 people in Michigan died of opioid overdoses; ten

years later, in 2017, the number of deaths was 2,033. There is pain in our community and the only way the world has taught us to deal with it is substitutive, to cover it up.

Substitutive joy tells us that joy and pain cannot exist together. If you want to feel joy you must find a way to get rid of the pain. If covering the pain up does not work then try unloading the pain on others. Substitutive joy convinces us if we can just make the other person feel our pain it will transfer from us to them and we are free to let joy take the place of the pain. Hate, abuse, and violence all stem from people trying to unload their pain onto someone else. 2018 had the highest reported incidents of hate crimes in the United States ever. There is pain in our nation and substitutive joy is how we deal with our pain.

Spend one day working in retail or a service job and you will see the pain that people cover or unload every day. In college I worked in a hardware store and by far my favorite assignment was the paint department. I would come in early if I heard we got new paint chip samples because I wanted to be the one to put them out. They always had the most ridiculous names and I dreamed of having the job of naming the colors. (Go through paint samples!)

I also liked mixing the paint. When a customer needed something mixed, the message would go out over the PA system and I would run to the paint counter. The way paint is mixed is by taking a can of base and mixing in concentrated colors according to a formula in the computer system. The regular concentrated pigments were red, blue and yellow but we also had black and some other secondary colors for specific brands.

One day a woman was buying a beautiful sunflower yellow for her child's room. I went to the computer typed in "brilliant sunflower" and the formula popped up on the screen. There were only two pigments called for but those colors made me second guess the system. There was yellow, of course, but also a fair amount of black. The system had never been wrong before so I went along and followed the formula, carefully measured out the pigment and hoped for the best as it clambered around in the mixer. When I opened the can to check the color, it was brilliant sunflower yellow. I was genuinely shocked that it wasn't grey with the amount of black put in. Don't tell my boss but after the customer left I tried a sample can with just the yellow pigment. The color that came out was yellow, but not the brilliant yellow that child was about to have on her walls. The yellow without the black was weaker, fainter. I doubt it would have looked much different from a yellowing old white wall. The black is what made the color have depth and presence.

When scripture and Jesus talk about joy the understanding is that pain and joy exist in the same can. Pain is an essential ingredient of joy. And if we can avoid covering and dumping our pain to allow it to mix and process and develop, God transforms it into joy. Joy without pain is not rooted in reality. There is no contrast in painless joy to really make the joy stand out as special. Joy is stronger when it is allowed to develop alongside our pain. In God's care pain is never the final state. When we look at our pain we see black but God sees the start of brilliant, yellow joy. Jesus says this kind of joy will never be taken away from us because it is not just a covered top coat that can be chipped away; it is an enduring color and pain is only a few shades away from joy.

To us it is obvious why this is the message Jesus leaves the disciples. We know the week ahead will be filled with every painful emotion one can think of. What Jesus does not want to happen is for the disciples to cover up or unload their pain. He wants them to remember substitutive joy does not work. It is shallow and fleeting. He wants them experience God's joy. That will mean sitting with the pain and with God but knowing that that pain will transform into their greatest joy. He allows them to express joy today on Palm Sunday. On Thursday he leaves them a meal to remember their joy when he is gone, so that when they get to Friday and the cross they have the tools to make it to Sunday. We as a community will walk that same path this week. Celebrating today, remembering Thursday, sitting in the pain of Friday ... then, when we are here again in a week, Easter will shine so much brighter because we have experienced the whole journey, the whole depth of holy emotion together.

This is the week to give your pain a chance to see the light. Uncover, hold on to it, treasure it even. Pain is not our enemy. In God's hands it is the beginning form of joy.