

## **The Practice of Joy**

**December 19, 2021**

Welcome to the *practice* of Joy. Like the other gifts of the spirit we've focused on in Advent-- Hope and Faith, Peace, and Love--it may be *simple* but it isn't always *easy* to build our "spiritual muscle memory" and open ourselves to the joy and gladness promised in the words of Isaiah we heard in the Daily Word.

As I prepared for our time together this morning, I knew I wanted to share the inspiration I found from two joyful, light-filled, deeply spiritual teachers: His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Emeritus of Southern Africa, Desmond Tutu. These two great friends spent a week together in 2015, in celebration of the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday.

In ***The Book of Joy***, Douglas Abrams makes visible their conversations about the nature of joy, obstacles to joy and practices that help us find the pillars of joy even in the midst of our very real, often painful, life circumstances. Before we explore all of that, we'll begin with a short centering practice-- the practice of setting an intention-- as shared by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu. They remind us that "Every conscious action begins with intention...which is simply a way to prepare our minds and hearts for how we want to face the day..." Our shared time of meditation will come at the end of my talk today.

So for now, wherever you are, whether here in the sanctuary, watching the live stream or the recording, please allow yourself to:

1. Sit comfortably, sense the soles of your feet on the ground... You can rest your hands on your legs or on your belly.
2. Close your eyes [or soften your gaze] and take several long breaths through your nose... Feel your stomach [or chest] rise and fall as you breathe... PAUSE
3. Now ask yourself: "What is my heart's desire? What do I wish for myself, for my loved ones, and for the world?" Our deepest desires usually lie beyond our temporary wishes and wants. They are likely to involve living with profound human values that lead to our greatest happiness, calling us back to our place within the fabric of life.

4. Now state your intention silently to yourself. It can be specific or it can be general. If [nothing arises], you can repeat these... lines adapted from the traditional Tibetan prayer of the Four Immeasurables, which has guided many on their journey to more compassion and greater happiness:

*May all beings attain happiness.*

*May all beings be free from suffering.*

*May all beings never be separated from joy.*

*May all beings abide in equanimity*

May all beings never be separated from joy...

For the Lord will comfort Zion... joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. ~Isaiah 51:3

As we come back fully into the room, gently hold your intention in your heart-mind and take a moment now to bring to mind how you might answer these questions: What IS Joy? And where do *you* find joy?

If you ever have a chance to watch YouTube clips of these two holy men interacting with each other with such deep respect and affection, you'll get a glimpse of what joy *IS*. The clear joy they take in each other and their friendship proves the truth of Anne Lamott's saying "laughter is carbonated holiness."

One of the things I find compelling about their conversations is that their wisdom comes as much from years of *real* life as it does from their rootedness in Buddhism or Christianity. Life in exile. Life under Apartheid. Countries in turmoil. Aging and illness and tricky knees.

Yet the book opens with this from Desmond Tutu: "We are fragile creatures, and it is *from* this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy." From this weakness, not despite it. What a relief to know we don't have to eliminate our own weakness in order to trust that the joy I see on *their* faces is attainable. From their deep

wells, and with the help of writer and editor Douglas Abrams, they take us on a journey into the heart of joy.

So, how do we fragile creatures describe joy? My teacher hat is going to show up here as I talk for a few minutes about one of my joys-- *words*, language, the subtle variations in meaning that open up whole new ways of seeing. Early in their visit, and in the book, Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama tease out the definitions of joy and happiness.

Abrams illustrates the challenge of embracing Tutu's words that "Joy subsumes happiness. Joy is the far greater thing" by looking to "Paul Ekman, famed emotions researcher and longtime friend of The Dalai Lama." But like that four-letter word, Love, I talked about last week, I bet we already know from our own experiences that the meaning of "joy" contains multitudes. Rather than a list of words and definitions (there's no vocab quiz, I promise!), here's what resonated with me when I read Ekman's list.

Joy is the simple pleasure of eating our favorite ice-cream or watching the sunset over water. We bubble over in joyful laughter when a friend shares a funny story. Joy can mean the contentment we feel in the presence of our grandbabies, or dear pet or a beloved. Joy is lively when it contains wonder or bliss or excitement. It's *schadenfreude* when we're gleeful over someone else's downfall! We may feel joy as relief when a worry or fear passes.

But Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama point us to a deeper, "lasting joy-- joy as a way of being--" a spiritual radiance that encompasses the joy and gladness, the thanksgiving we read in Isaiah, and the joy that Buddhists call "mudita"-- rejoicing in the happiness and good fortune of others. How do we embrace that radiant, *lasting* joy, and what gets in our way?

*"You are made for perfection, but you are not yet perfect. You are a masterpiece in the making." Desmond Tutu*

In the section of the book that covers days 2 and 3 of their visit, the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama name and describe, with great compassion for their own humanity AND OURS, eight ways we shut ourselves off from accessing that deeper, lasting joy:

- Fear, Stress and Anxiety
- Frustration and Anger
- Sadness and Grief
- Despair
- Loneliness
- Envy
- Suffering and Adversity
- Illness and Fear of Death

At different times in our life-- or even different days in our week!-- we each face these obstacles to some degree. I may not envy my neighbor's car or house, but what if I envy someone else's talents, or health, or family? At times, we may feel completely overwhelmed by the magnitude of our worries and stress. By the crushing weight of our grief. By the loneliness and isolation we have felt so keenly these past two years. We may intellectually understand that death is part of life, but then a moment comes that forces us to go beyond an abstract understanding or fear to a sudden and unavoidable reckoning with our mortality, or that of someone we cherish.

But of course the obstacles are not the final word! The beauty culled from days 4 & 5 of their teaching are the Eight Pillars of Joy, gifts that are as present as our obstacles, and in fact are sometimes the paradoxical flip side of the coin. Here is found the reminder that our way to joy is not through *denying or eliminating* the very real, poignant, frustrating obstacles we face. The way to joy asks us to take a "God-view," to step back from our own pain, and find the larger view that gives us space to heal.

The way to lasting joy begins then, says the Dalai Lama, with "a shift in perspective—from oneself and toward others, from anguish to compassion— seeing that others are suffering as well...we recognize... we are not alone, our pain is lessened. This recognition that we are all connected...is the birth of empathy and compassion." And

Archbishop Tutu reminds us *when we fail at shifting our perspective, then we are called to treat ourselves with compassion too.*

Perspective. Humility. Humor. The *acceptance* of “that which is” that is the place where change begins. We fill ourselves at the well of these “qualities of the mind” and the “qualities of the heart” of *forgiveness* that frees us from the past. Gratitude. Compassion. Generosity. And once again we come to the *practices* that help us fill our wells, that help us find enough spaciousness to witness our habits, our ways of getting stuck, our painful circumstances, even our joys...

Another of my spiritual mentors, Starr Regan DiCiurcio, writes about Joy as “an enduring encounter with spirit...It is a reflection of coming into wholeness, into our true selves.” Echoing the wisdom of the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, Starr writes in her book *Divine Sparks*:

As we share our joy and our suffering, we come to know our own humanity. It is at once extraordinary and singular, as well as universal and timeless. The particulars of our joy are known to us, but if we look deeply, they unite us to all those who have been uplifted in the same way. The depths of our sorrow feel isolating and beyond anyone else’s comprehension. In fact, that very pain is the path to a true understanding of our brothers and sisters across all time and cultures. These opportunities to encounter our joy and suffering in awareness are ours to embrace. This may take courage but it is the fullness of life that awaits us in these encounters with spirit.

Encounters with Spirit. Prayer and contemplation, meditation, resting in the stillness-- we know these simple-- but not always easy-- practices help turn grief from despair into the depth of love that lights our sense of purpose. In the stillness we notice envy and let it melt into gratitude. In the quiet, the carbonated holiness of laughter helps dissipate our frustration. And sometimes in the quiet we hear the voices of anger and compassion speak together, calling for justice, calling us once again to BE Love at work in the world.

And that brings me, always back to you. To us. To the reality that yes, there is deep, individual, soulful inner work that for each of us must be part of our growing awareness of where God is calling. But always, there is the presence of God in you, that lights the way for me to experience the presence of God in me. That is the vital gift of spiritual companions living, praying, *being* in community.

And again from the Book of Joy:

“...real knowledge and wisdom take time. These practices reward and deepen through continued effort. Usually when we start meditating or praying, we can experience what the Archbishop has called “spiritual sweets,” or the tingling and calming that comes from beginning to pay attention to our inner life. Like sweets, these are tasty, but the real benefits occur as we create a...container into which we can pour our heart and soul as we experience the joys and sorrows of life...Not all practices will work for all people. Find what works best for you.”

As we come to our time of meditation on this last Sunday of Advent, we rejoice in the spiritual gifts we encounter in our time together. We rejoice in our shared Christ-consciousness that unites us beyond limits of time and place. As we journey together, may you feel the presence of God-within whispering songs of Hope, Peace, Love and Joy.

Now, close your eyes again, or let your gaze soften. Take a deep breath in and as you exhale, allow yourself to settle comfortably wherever you are. Feel the soles of your feet resting on the floor, and imagine your feet rooted to the earth... sense your legs and hips and back...and feel all the places where your body is touching your chair... and feel yourself rooted and grounded...

Think back to the intention you set earlier, and let it fully arise, or perhaps be refined now in your heart. Bring to mind again how you answered the questions: What IS Joy? Where do *you* find joy? And now think about what are *your* obstacles to joy? Hold those obstacles lightly in your heart with self-compassion.

Bringing awareness again to your own breath, sense the rhythm of your breath in... and breath out...

In the stillness, notice with compassion... your fear or worry about an adversity you ...or someone you love...are facing...breathing in, know that you are not alone...breathing out, gently ease the weight of your fear and suffering...

In the stillness, notice with compassion a situation.. that causes frustration or anger to arise...breathing in, trust that forgiveness is present here... breathing out... gently let go of anger

In the stillness, notice with compassion where your mind gets stuck in comparisons or judgment...breathing in, trust *you* are enough, your needs are generously met...breathing out... sense gratitude in the moment, just as it is

In the stillness, notice with compassion where your heart feels heavy with sorrow and grief, with despair or loneliness... breathe in and know you are not alone...breathe out and let the blanket of compassion wrap around you

In the stillness, gently bring to mind a beloved who has died, and allow a cherished memory to bring you with love into their presence...breathe in the comfort of their loving presence still with you...breathe out, and let this presence help you befriend... for just a moment... the fragile creature of your own body

I breathe in...and I hear the voice of God whispering hope...  
I breathe out...and I hear the voice of God whispering hope...

I breathe in...and I hear the voice of God whispering peace...  
I breathe out...and I hear the voice of God whispering peace

I breathe in...and I hear the voice of God whispering love...  
I breathe out...and I hear the voice of God whispering love...

I breathe in...and I hear the voice of God whispering joy...  
I breathe out...and I hear the voice of God whispering joy...

I'll close with a prayer from Fra Giovanni:

*There is nothing I can give you which you have not. But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in darkness, could we but see. And to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look! -Fra Giovanni*

May it be so. And so it is. Amen.