

Easter 6 2018

I have one of those unfortunate faces that lapses into a frown in repose. It doesn't mean I'm unhappy or disapproving but my mouth just naturally sits with a downward curve rather than an upward one. This meant that when I was younger I was subject more than most to shouts on the street of 'smile, darling' or 'cheer up, love, it might never happen.' I longed to have the chutzpah to come up with some wittier response than an ironic fake grin or a hard stare. But I would generally just blush and try hard to remember that 'pleasing random men' was not my life's work.

These sexist, controlling and embarrassing comments were clearly inappropriate and are still a bane on many women's life. What is more socially acceptable, but potentially no less damaging, are those modern cure-alls of 'positive thinking' or 'being in the moment'. We are told that we only need the right mindset to rise above the sadness and strain of our lives. I'm not a naturally angry person, but this really angers me. No amount of positive thinking is going to lift a depressive illness or make a time of trauma bearable. No focus on being in the moment ever cured cancer or erased the pain of loss.

Which may be a strange way in to a sermon that is taking as its focus those words from the gospel 'that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.' But I want to make sure from the start that we find the right foundation for joy, the right focus for joy. A foundation and focus that do not rely on our own ability to think ourselves happy. A foundation and focus that pay attention both to the unhappiness in many of our lives and to the uncontrollability of many of our minds and moods.

There are few experiences lonelier than sitting in a large group of people thinking to yourself that you are the only one who is struggling. That you are the only one who lives with depression or struggles each day against anxiety or who has issues with addiction. That you are the only one who doesn't have their life together, the only one not able to experience the joy that woman in the pulpit is going on about. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness you are very far from alone – mental illness affects 1 in 5 Americans every year, and 1 in 25 find their life severely impacted by it. I would think many more than half of us here have had our own lives or the lives of those we love touched by mental illness.

If our joy as Christians is to be real, to be more than a false smile pasted on because we think God is shouting at us 'smile darling', then it has to be a joy that can reach into this reality. There are a couple of theologians who have done some work that can help us here, both working in the field of trauma and faith – Serene Jones and Shelly Rambo. They have attended to the experience of those who have gone through great hardship – sexual abuse, the traumatic stress of warfare – and who have to live with the continuing ripples of this reality.

The reality they deal with is hard. It is the opposite of an easy, happy-clappy triumphalist Christianity. Rambo says: "Life, for many, does not triumph over death. Instead life persists in the midst of death, and death in the midst of life."ⁱ Traumatic events do not find closure, they do not get left behind, they shadow us even as we move into a continuation of life. Yet also traumatic events are survivable – they do not end our capacity for living. And she also says: "Redemption is, in essence, a divine love story."ⁱⁱ Somehow we need to locate joy in this mix of anguished survival and divine hopeful love.

Look what it says in the passage from John – Jesus tells us he says these things to us that *his* joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. So what is this joy of Jesus? It is not a joy that floats above suffering. Jesus' whole ministry has been among people who are suffering – through the demons of their own illness or through the demons of an occupying empire. And Jesus speaks these words to his disciples during the gospel's farewell discourse – when Jesus is himself preparing to face the trauma of betrayal, torture and death. This cannot be a heedless joy he promises us but something rooted in hard reality. A joy that walks hand in hand with the hard truths of life. A joy grounded in vulnerable love.

Jesus' joy, and our own, is not a veneer covering over our pain but a life-giving energy in the midst of pain. This is how Serene Jones beautifully puts it: "to be saved is not to be taken elsewhere. It is to be awakened – to mourn and to wonder. And to stand courageously on the promise that grace is sturdy enough to hold it all – you, and me, and every broken, trauma-ridden soul that wanders through our history. To us all, love comes."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now it is only through this love that comes to us all that joy can come to us all. Not through our own efforts, not through cutting ourselves off from the rest of suffering humanity, not through the power of positive thinking. It is a joy that lives in the sudden wonder of connection, in relationship, in finding our identity as part of the whole glorious and wounded mass of creation. Joy is not the same as safety, nor is it the negation of negative emotions. It is the glimpse of a flowering cherry that reminds us beauty still lives in the world, it's the touch of a human hand when we thought ourselves forgotten and alone, it's the awareness that others struggle too and, even with our own woundedness, we can ease their pain.

And there is no 'ought' connected to joy. We should never beat ourselves up for not feeling joyful. The same Jesus who calls us to joy was the one who cried out with despair 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'. What we may be able to feel when joy is far away is its faint echo in hope. And when we can't even feel that we may be able to hold on to the 'promise that grace is sturdy enough to hold it all'. And when our grip weakens even on this then we can let our faith community hold us and hold this truth in safe keeping till we can open to it again.

And remember that even when we are in the abyss we are not alone. To quote Shelly Rambo again: "Divine and human meet in the middle, and there is an intermingling of breath in the abyss; it is the point at which the silent human cry meets the silent divine cry."^{iv} The God who calls us to joy is also present in its absence, loving us through everything and never abandoning her hurting children. Our most painful breath is breathed by God also.

Oh my dear fellow strugglers I pray that the joy of Jesus may be in you and that your joy may be complete. And I pray that when your joy is far from complete you can still know that grace is sturdy enough to hold you. And I pray that this community may help make real the truth that faith and Easter resurrection attests: "to us all, love comes." For this is the truth: To us all, love comes.

ⁱ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Louisville Kentucky: John Knox Westminster Press, 2010, p165.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p153.

ⁱⁱⁱ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured Word*, Louisville Kentucky: John Knox Press Westminster, 2009, final sentence.

iv *Spirit and Trauma*, p170.