



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Third Candle – Joy

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Our trip around the Advent wreath has taken us through two blue candles, hope and peace. Today suddenly, the candle is pink for joy. For a long time, the color of Advent was purple, like Lent. But fairly recently, there has been a movement toward blue. Possibly promoted by those who make and sell altar hangings and vestments but there is no need to be cynical here. The idea of blue is twofold; a dark blue, like the sky before dawn is the color of expectation for the rising sun. Then there is the blue also associated with Mary, much like ours. The darker blue is called a Sarum blue and it is also included in our blue vestments. There is considerable controversy about Advent colors - and the truth is that there is no one right way or right set of colors. I personally like the idea of the words to one of our Advent hymns, *Creator of the stars of night, thy people's everlasting light* as reason enough to stay in this color of the night sky, awaiting the light.

But the rose colored candle is for this particular Sunday and is used to signify joy. And what a marvelous thing joy is. I have been a student of joy since 1999. It was a dog that got me started, a golden retriever to be precise. I was in seminary in Evanston, Illinois, on the shores of Lake Michigan. Most of the towns north of Chicago have a dog beach - one section of their waterfront where dogs with the proper tags can romp to their hearts content. I would usually take my morning walk by one of them. One day, while sitting on a rock watching the waves, this happiest of dogs came crashing through the trees from the parking lot. He was way ahead of his humans. He had his favorite beach toy in his mouth, a tennis ball with a steamer for better throwing and he was so excited. The expression on his face as he looked at the stretch of sand and the water and then back to the oh so slowly arriving humans was pure joy. His paws were dancing on the sand as if tapping out in Morse Code "Oh joy, Oh joy, Oh joy!" It was infectious behavior, reflecting a consciousness really, As I watched him I remember thinking that we should all be so committed to joy. I still believe that.

As always you know that I like to start with definitions and sometimes anti-definitions. First of all, what joy is not – it is not happiness, it is not euphoria. Interestingly, the first definition given by the standard Oxford Dictionary for joy is "pleasure; extreme gladness", followed by a lengthy list of synonyms which includes "delight, ecstasy, or rapture and bliss." I take issue with that definition, primarily because I believe it is far too limited in its scope. Joy is not giddy or casual – it is a serious and profound experience. Joy is not momentary or ephemeral but possibly one of the highest ambitions we might embrace.

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This is found in the second definition offered in the Oxford Dictionary comes closer to capturing the essence of joy, described as “a treat, treasure, blessing or godsend.” I believe joy is an inherently spiritual experience, so I turned to a favorite source *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* and found this; joy is “the by-product of life with God”. Finally, I asked Peter, and he said, “that’s easy, joy is an emergent property of a life lived with God.” I told him, thanks, that clears it all up for me! Then he launched into a diatribe on complexity science and emergent properties, and I will save you the gory details, but I think he made a good point, which I will share with you shortly.

My own understanding of joy is that is nothing less than our natural, most elemental state. It is as we were created to be. If one ascribes to the Augustinian interpretation of our human condition as fallen it would be possible to say that joy is our pre-fall condition. In such a view, true joy awaits the end of the age, the Second Coming, when we are finally delivered back to our intended state of being. But I do not subscribe to such thinking. I do not believe in Original Sin as a phenomenon that robs us of our true nature. It is the reality and presence of joy that convinces me we are not irretrievably broken. We are intrinsically joyful, but sometimes we forget how to *access* this fundamental expression of our human condition.

Joy is an integral part of creation that seems to indicate rightness – rightness about the entire purpose of Creation, about the relationships of different aspects of Creation to each other, especially our relationship to God, and about the expression of individual creativity. Just like the unfettered joy of dogs on a beach.

The Psalms speak to all these elements of rightness. In Psalm 89 Mounts Tabor and Hermon “joyously praise God’s name”. In Psalm 96, “the heavens are glad and the earth rejoices” and, “the trees of the forest sing for joy.” By Psalm 98 it’s not just mountains and trees but the whole earth,

“make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for his is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”
How could the earth not be joyous when God has declared that it is very good indeed?

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Creation celebrates its existence by being what it is. Mountains are strong and steadfast and cause us to gasp at their beauty and invariably turn our wondering minds to things above us, things higher than we are. All a mountain needs to do to express joy is to be and we are awed. We used to live near Saddleback Mountain in Southern California. The Santa Anna mountain range works its way up to this saddle shaped glory. I remember when I first moved there, I took great delight in the fact that I could see the ocean and the mountains every day. My morning drive to work was a treat along Crown Valley Parkway as it curved through the valley would give me a sequential view of the mountain range until at last Saddleback popped into view and it would invariably make me laugh as though the mountain was playing hide and seek with me. Admittedly I felt silly but joy can be that way, because it lives outside the ordinary and connects us to the essence of what is, in ourselves and our relationships with God.

One of my favorite stories of joy came from a friend from S. Africa, Ntsiki Kabane Langford. She worked for the National Episcopal Church in the Jubilee Ministries program, of which I was a part. We were all gathering for a Jubilee conference and Ntsiki had flown from in New York City. Earlier that day, she had gone to the UN and voted for the first time in South African elections. It was 1994 and Ntsiki, a black woman who had been denied education by apartheid, voted for Nelson Mandela. As we gathered, Ntsiki could not contain herself. She periodically broke into spontaneous dance - her body expressing her joy. She and her fellow countrymen and women were finally in right relationship with their fellow citizens and the world. Her joy was contagious, it was the joy of hope and justice and it was holy. It was as though she danced God's smile. May we all be committed to that.

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