

Practising our Religion to En-joy Life
Sermon on James 1:17-29 and Psalm 45
Sunday September 3, 2006
Trinity United Ottawa
Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

“Doers of the word will be blessed in their doing.”
“Your God has anointed you with oil of gladness”

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine your Self, anointed by the Holy with ‘oil of gladness.’ A tender healing touch on your brow delivers a sweet scent that causes you to breath this delight in deep, drawing your lips to a smile. All but this immediate moment is swept aside by the experience of blessing. Your countenance is lifted to gladness and your heart expands in joy.

An anointing touch with ‘oil of gladness’ would surely evoke an immediate experience of joy. Joy - this is what we want most in life, isn’t it? That real deep joy that we feel as emotion in our bodies, before we ever recognize it with our minds.

What does joy feel like in you? Check in with your body’s memory of a joyful moment... What sensations - and then what words - express your joy? Peaceful, uplifted, energized, centred, passionate, balanced? Maybe with some smiling tears? Joy is our body’s sure signal that we are blessed. Our most believable evidence of goodness in life. Our certainty of the Creator’s love. Personal and shared moments of joy are proof that Creation truly en-joys us...each and every one...in real and immediate, personal and discernable ways. I think joy is perhaps the surest basis of faith...felt in every spiritual experience.

When I recall an experience of joy, I enjoy it again and I want more of it. Don’t you? I would really like to live my life joy-full-y. That’s why I practise my

religion. Because I have found in spiritual practise, in lived and breathed Christianity, a path to more joy-full living. Perhaps that comes as a surprise to some of you? And to others as no surprise at all!

It is a well kept secret in our culture today, that most of us don't practise our religion in order to *be* good, we follow this path in life because it *feels* good. Practising Christianity brings us more joy. It helps us learn how to choose and act and relate in positive ways, so that we feel blessed and experience more joy in life. Today I think it is true that most people come to church on Sundays because they enjoy this community gathering for praise and prayer. They feel good about the singing and intellectual stimulation and contemplation that helps us align our living with the good. We enjoy the Sunday reminders that raise our awareness and motivate our choices through of the rest of the week. Certainly fewer and fewer people come to church because they 'should!'

In the past, and in lots of churches today I'm sure, there has been a problem with joy. In spite of all the liturgical commands to 'rejoice!', church has sometimes been a joyless place. But as Paul Tillich, a theologian who initiated much reformation in Christianity back in the 1950s dared to ask; "Is our lack of joy do to the fact that we are Christians or to the fact that we are not sufficiently Christian?"

Certainly lip service Christianity does not grow joy. As the Epistle writer James challenges us in today's scripture reading: "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...those doers who act will be blessed in their doing... Religion that is pure is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

With today's knowledge of the historical Jesus' way of life and words of teaching, we might do well to hear: "Religion that is real is this; include the marginalized

and advocate for the oppressed. Dare to counter corporate and consumer culture by inviting everyone to be fed.” Jesus’ vision, which he pictured for us as a Kingdom of Heaven, was a lifestyle of justice and inclusion and compassion for all. And while it is often difficult for us to choose a seat at Jesus’ chaotic table, when we do it, it brings us moments of pure communion - joy! The living out of our Christian values in relationships - with our Creator, our Self, all people and the Creation itself- that is what really enlarges our capacity to enjoy life.

Now joy is not the absence of pain or sorrow or suffering, as you know. Indeed, joy is often the very fruit of suffering survived, or sorrow given meaning by our Christian wisdom. Think about how often your joyful moments have come on the heels of difficult times? Think of a friendship that embraced you just after you lost a love. An opportunity that grew surprisingly out of a disaster? The risky but fulfilling career that was facilitated by getting fired? Joy is often the sweet lemonade you make for yourself, or with a friend, out of one of life’s lemons!

Joy- felt in our bodies and spirits, is the reward of deepening relationships. A sense of connectedness...that makes us a more consciously a part of the web of loving Creation. Joy is born of the on-growing process of our spiritual healing into the home of our wholeness. And our religion offers us disciplines and practises to make our relationships more whole and holy. Less reactive and broken. A lot more fun. Joy, real joy is born when we learn how to plug our self into the positive currents of Creation, through acts of compassion and caring.

Our Christian prayer and praise, meditation and contemplation, singing and silence, strengthen and inspire and remind us, to make personal choices that plug us into that positive power of love we call God, day by day.

So let us learn together how to follow Jesus’ way of justice and compassion for all,

by being doers of the word, practising our religion, day by day. We do this, that we might be anointed with the oil of gladness.

Let's enjoy singing our reminder together, right through this week: "Day By Day"
(from Godspell)