

A Season of Joy: ACCEPTANCE

Job 42:1-7

John 8:1-11

*Accept what is, but do not despair.
Hope for what can be.*

A sermon preached by
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I don't know what your thoughts were when you heard that your pastors were going to do a sermon series on joy. But I wouldn't be surprised if you thought, "Boy, that's dumb. Look at all the suffering, the sadness, the problems all around us. How can we find joy in a world like we live in?"

Of course, it's precisely because of the world we live in that we need to find joy. And we have this book, *The Book Of Joy*, written about two great spiritual leaders—the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu—who encountered great suffering and injustice in their lives.¹ Yet they were (and are) tremendously joyful people.

Each week, we are considering an impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy, taken from their book. Nevertheless, I would not be surprised if you were tempted to live in despair. Every day is a challenge. New problems come up all the time. Old problems don't go away. Life is just hard sometimes. It's easy to lose hope, and when we do, we can't find joy. Despair—hopelessness—is an impediment to joy.

But with the resources of faith, we can overcome despair and find joy that lasts. *The Book of Joy* talks about three antidotes to despair. The first is perspective. We talked about perspective three weeks ago as a pillar of joy, and it's a similar idea today. We get so focused on our own problems, or on the problems that we get in a never-ending flood from the news media, that our hearts are turned to despair.

But when we broaden our view and look at things with a larger perspective, we realize that there is more good than bad in the world. There are more good people than bad people. Human beings are capable of terrible atrocities against their fellow human beings. But they are also capable of great compassion, heroism, support, and love. Archbishop Tutu said, "We have a fantastic capacity for goodness."²

One of the most familiar examples of that contrast is the events surrounding 9/11. What a terrible and hopeless thing to have four jet airliners hijacked and crashed into targets, killing 3,000 people and doing billions of dollars' worth of damage. Yet at the same time, we saw and heard story after story of heroes, first responders who gave their lives to help others, regular people who went above and beyond to help. The nation and the world responded with waves of grief and compassion and support. Prayer vigils and blood drives and collections sprang up everywhere. It was enough to restore your hope in humanity.

Commenting on that day, the Archbishop said, "When a disaster such as 9/11 happens, we realize we are family. We *are* family. Those people in the Twin Towers are our sisters and brothers. And even more startlingly, the people who were piloting those planes, they are our ..brothers. You have a tsunami happen, and have you seen the outpouring of love and compassion and caring? I mean, you don't know the victims from a brass farthing. And people just gave and gave. Because that's actually who we *really* are."³ That's a helpful perspective.

Another antidote to despair is hope. Hope is more than optimism. Optimism says, "Things will get better; everything's going to be all right." Hope says, "Whether or not things get better, God will give us the resources to endure. And in the end, we will be victorious." Optimism is based on faith in human character; hope is founded on faith in God's providence and sovereignty.

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, distinguishes between optimism and hope with the "Stockdale Paradox." It is named after the late Admiral Jim Stockdale, the Navy pilot who was captured by the North Vietnamese in 1965 and was held prisoner in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" for eight years. As the ranking officer in the prison, Stockdale was singled out for torture more than twenty times. For eight years he had no rights, no release date, no certainty of ever seeing his family again. Yet he shouldered the burden of command, devising ways to communicate secretly with other prisoners and to encourage them to persevere. At one point he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor, deliberately disfiguring himself so he could not be shown as an example of a well-treated prisoner. Finally, in 1973, he was released to return home.

When Jim Collins interviewed Admiral Stockdale, he asked him who *didn't* make it in that horrible situation. Stockdale quickly answered, "The optimists. The ones who kept telling themselves that things would get better and that they would be home by Christmas or by Easter or by July 4. They died of broken hearts."

What gave Admiral Stockdale the strength to endure was a combination of realism and hope. Whatever he was facing at the moment, he always believed that he would ultimately be victorious. "I never lost faith in the end of the story," he said. "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."⁴

That's the "Stockdale Paradox": Be realistic about the obstacles and difficulties you face, but never lose faith that you will prevail in the end. You may not be facing the brutality of a North Vietnamese prison camp, but whatever you encounter, you can endure it with hope.

The final antidote to despair is community. We can continue to live and thrive as long as we have the support of others. We can't do life all alone; we have to have relationships, a group of people who will pick us up when we're down and keep us on the path. Hear the wise words of Desmond Tutu: "Hope is nurtured by relationship, by community,

whether that community is a literal one or one fashioned from the long memory of human striving, whose membership includes Gandhi, King, Mandela, and countless others. Despair turns us inward. Hope sends us into the arms of others.”⁵

Despair is an impediment to joy that is destroyed by perspective, hope, and community. Then the pillar of hope for today is **ACCEPTANCE**. We find joy by practicing the mental attitude of acceptance, which is “the ability to accept our life in all its pain, imperfection, and beauty.”⁶ We have to come to terms with the way things are before we can make them any different. Archbishop Tutu: “We cannot succeed by denying what exists. The acceptance of reality is the only place from which change can begin.”⁷ Acceptance is not resignation or passivity or defeatism. It is a powerful engagement of the present moment on its own terms. As we look at life all around us, we don’t want to escape what is, but we want to figure out how God can use this mess for good.

The Old Testament figure of Job is a case study in acceptance. Job had it so well, and he deserved every bit of it, because he was a righteous man. But then, in a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, Job lost everything—house, children, livestock. Job’s friends kept analyzing the theological meaning of this tragedy, and Job kept maintaining his innocence and crying out for God. Job had many questions, and it took a while for him to come to some acceptance. But finally, God showed up and challenged Job’s understanding. Finally seeing the nature of reality—that God was God, and he was not—Job came to accept his situation: “*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*”⁸ When Job accepted his condition, then the Lord restored his fortunes two times over.

Jesus extended his acceptance to people. To Jesus, every person was a child of God. Everyone was a person of worth and capable of redemption. So you see Jesus hanging out with people who were not accepted by the religious people—lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor and marginalized people of his day. Jesus loved them all.

John 8 tells a story that perhaps was so shocking that it only made it into one Gospel, and even some of the early versions of John leave it out. Jesus was teaching in the Temple, and the religious leaders brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. The text doesn’t say, but I am sure she was humiliated in front of these men and was not put together very well at the moment. The religious leaders challenged Jesus: “The Law of Moses says we should stone such women. What do you say?” Their rocks were in their hands. Jesus seemed to ignore them for a moment, but they kept on after him, until he stood up and said, “*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*”⁹ Well, that shut them up. One by one, the religious leaders dropped their stones and walked away mumbling. Jesus looked at the woman and said, “Where are your accusers? Did no one condemn you?” The woman said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and do not sin again.” Jesus didn’t judge the humiliated woman; he didn’t even condemn her obvious sin. He offered her his acceptance, and he gave her hope.

Acceptance is a pillar of joy that we all need to work on. There are some things we cannot accept: hatred, prejudice, oppression, injustice, self-righteousness, violence and injury to others. There are some things that you cannot make OK.

But there are many other things that we can accept. The sooner we can engage reality for what it is, the sooner we can find peace and move toward joy. Like Job, we can accept

that God is God, and we are not. We can accept God's grace and love that will not let us go. We can accept the common humanity that we share with every human being, regardless of gender, race, nationality, or religion. We can accept that we will not always agree with everyone on everything, and that does not mean we can't be in relationship with them. We can accept our differences, the strange appearances and languages and thoughts and lifestyles that characterize the diverse family of God. All their problems are not ours to fix. We want to work for good in the world, but the first step toward making the world a better place is to accept the way the world is now.

Acceptance is not always an easy hill to climb. George Matheson was one of the most renowned pastors and preachers in Scotland in the 19th century. He was able to accomplish so much in spite of the fact that he suffered a degenerative eye disease that started when he was 18, and by his early 20's, he was blind. In fact, his heart was broken early on when his fiancée broke off their engagement because she couldn't bear the thought of living with a blind man.

George was assisted in his studies and his ministry by his sister, who helped him in almost every way that a good pair of eyes would. But eventually, his sister fell in love, too, and on June 6, 1882, she got married. George could not accept her marriage, maybe because he was resentful of his own love life being a failure.

On the evening of his sister's wedding, George was alone in his house, and something happened to change his heart. He later wrote, "Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. ...All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high."¹⁰

The hymn George is referring to is "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." It is a great statement of trust in God, which is the basis of acceptance, which is a pillar of joy. Listen to these words:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.¹¹

As our joy practice today, try to meditate on a situation that you are having a hard time accepting. Remind yourself that this is the nature of reality. Acknowledge that you cannot know all the factors that led to this situation. Then acknowledge that what has already happened has already happened. Remind yourself, “In order to make the most positive contribution to this situation, I must accept the reality of its existence.”¹²

Then repeat with me the “Serenity Prayer” by Reinhold Neibuhr: **God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right, if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.**¹³

¹ Douglas Abrams, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

² *The Book Of Joy*, 116.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ James Collins, *Good To Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 83-87.

⁵ *The Book Of Joy*, 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁸ Job 42:3-6.

⁹ John 8:7.

¹⁰ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-love-that-wilt-not-let-me-go>.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Matheson.

¹¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, # 480.

¹² *The Book Of Joy*, 332-334.

¹³ https://www.prayerfoundation.org/dailyoffice/serenity_prayer_full_version.htm.