



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Spirituality of Joy

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“Did you take pleasure in it?” This question is the traditional litmus test for a sin according to the Catholic Church. Believe it or not, the inspiration for today’s sermon topic came from a Catholic - not Stephen Grimm, but a different Stephen, Stephen Colbert of Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*. He was interviewed by Rolling Stone magazine recently in an article called “The Joy of Colbert,” and I was inspired by learning what is written on a piece of paper taped to his computer. It says, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

As a half-hearted agnostic who errs toward theism myself, I find this statement rings true. You hear about God being present when justice is realized, or when compassion graces human relations, but authentic *joy* might be the most convincing sales pitch for God’s existence. Of course, there’s a lot of so-called ‘joy’ that gets peddled to us, especially this time of year. This is supposed to be a joyous time of year, and commerce wants you to purchase every store-bought version of joy imaginable. Even the churches are peddling joy, and apparently Neighborhood Church is no exception.

But let’s face it: once you’re not a kid anymore, the Christmas season offers a *complex* kind of joy, and that’s only if you’re willing to put some work into how you can embrace joy authentically. I hope my thoughts today can help get you started. Especially this year, when unemployment is at a record high, it’s hard to lose yourself in the holiday spirit. When you know others are struggling, how much merriment is really appropriate? This year, the whole gift exchanging ritual may seem like an even more wasteful charade than usual – why should I buy stuff for people I’m not even sure they’ll like, when others don’t have money for the basics, when agencies and organizations are suffering, when people are suffering. With the demands of gift-giving so depleting, you have to wonder, where is the joy in this?

There can be other reasons why joy is a complex emotion this time of year, and I offer myself as a case in point. I’m actually one of those annoying people who really loves the holidays – I love Christmas, even though it’s kind of embarrassing and un-cool to admit this. I love the beauty and the silliness, I love the decorations, the music, and playing elf. Most of all, I love the true meaning of the season, which I hope to convey to you today. At the same time, I’m also usually navigating the winter seasonal blues, so it’s a strange mixture of giddy joy and mild depression, if there can be such a thing. I have empathy for those who fight depression in general - it’s hard to let the light in when you can’t open the blinds.

But the season of advent, these weeks leading up to the Winter Solstice and to Christmas, has everything to do with opening those blinds. It is actually one of the best spiritual opportunities of the year – this is a time when we are most attuned to a choice – we can choose whether or not to fully embrace life, whether or not to become aware of how blessed we really are, no matter what.

Traditionally, advent is about waiting for the 2nd coming of Christ, while commemorating the first coming of Christ at Christmas. I’ve never understood the theology of the first coming of Christ, so I definitely don’t understand the waiting for the second. It strikes me as going hand in hand with the Puritanical idea that our waiting for something better is more holy than enjoying what’s already been given us, what’s right here in front of us.

So true to liberal religious fashion, I present the alternative take on advent, and one that is more pagan. Advent is a time to prepare for the return of the light, for the return of joy. It’s a time to figure out how to open the blinds, even when you don’t feel like it. It’s also a time to wake up to what you have – to realize that opening ourselves to joy really is a choice.

There are a lot of reasons to get depressed this time of year, besides the lessening of light – with all the reminding of how happy we ought to be, we may be more reminded of what we lack, and the feelings of disappointment and resentment can be overwhelming. There can also be grief – we may have lost a job, or the chance to retire – we may have lost a loved one. We may see others close to us who are grieving similar losses.

And despite these sadnesses, if we so choose, we can still open ourselves to the joy of the season. We can still ask the question, who am I to deny the pleasures I am allowed in this life? I was also inspired in the Stephen Colbert interview by his description of his mother. He says, "My desire to see things positively comes from my mom. She raised me after her husband and two of her boys died – and she did a great job, and her faith played a great role in that. She's a loving, joyful, not-bitter woman and, boy, that's a great example to have in your life. It makes your travails seem pretty simple in respect." Of course, Stephen Colbert's mother is Catholic too, so there might be something about this Jesus story to which we should pay attention

We can find some inspiration for the real meaning of Christmas in how Christianity was first practiced, which again, was much closer to a pagan sensibility than it is today. Long ago, Christian worship was far more frenetic and conducive to a state of pure joy for its worshippers. Author Barbara Ehrenreich is best known for her book, *Nickled and Dimed*, but she also published an interesting volume in 2006 about humanity's irrepressible desire for ecstatic celebration, called *Dancing in the Streets, A History of Collective Joy*.

By ecstatic celebration, I'm talking about the kinds of things we think of people doing when they 'party hardy' – singing, dancing, dressing up, feasting, and yes, at times, drinking. The fact is that community revelry as the main event of religious worship has deep origins in human history and culture, around the globe - even in the west. Ehrenreich observes,

"Almost a thousand years after the early Church fathers issued their first condemnations of dancing in churches, we find the leaders of Catholicism still railing against ecstatic and 'lascivious' behavior at Christian services. Judging from the volume of condemnations from on high, the custom of dancing in churches was thoroughly entrenched in the late Middle Ages and apparently tolerated – if not actually enjoyed – even by many parish priests. Priests danced; women danced; whole congregations joined in . . . Christianity remained, to a certain extent, a *danced religion* (italics are mine)."

In a footnote, she mentions that European churches did not even have pews until sometime in the 18th century. People stood or milled around, creating a very different dynamic than we find in today's churches, where (as you know) people are expected to spend most of their time sitting.

Indeed, there is some evidence that the figure of Jesus was modeled after the Greek God Dionysus, or Bacchus for the Romans. That's right, Jesus was a party dude, and in the beginning, there was far less guilt and shame associated with this form of worshipping the spirit, and celebrating life. Ehrenreich points out that both Jesus and Dionysus "shared a bohemian perspective, both were scornful of the toil and striving that take up so much human energy. Dionysus was always pulling women away from their housework to join his manic rites. Jesus advised his followers to quit worrying about where their next meal would come from and emulate the lilies of the field and the fowls of the air: 'for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns.' Both . . . upheld what has been called a *hedonic* vision of community, based on egalitarianism and the joyous immediacy of human experience . . . [for] to 'lose oneself' in ecstasy – to let go of one's physical and temporal boundaries – is to glimpse, however briefly, the prospect of eternity."

This is certainly *not* the Christianity or Catholicism we are familiar with today. What happened to the fun? The sociological explanation makes sense, as defined by I.M. Lewis in his 1971 book, *Ecstatic Religion*. He observes, "new faiths may announce their advent with a flourish of ecstatic revelations, but once they become securely established they have little time or tolerance for enthusiasm. For the religious enthusiast, with his direct claim to divine knowledge, is always a threat to the established order." And so this was the route of Catholicism, to be sure, but for Protestant faith as well. Even our very own Ralph Waldo Emerson was labeled heretical when he merely preached on the idea that our experience of the divine should be direct, and not 'corpse-cold', as he put it, as Unitarianism was. Let's face it, Unitarians have never been known for ecstatic worship, except perhaps in the heyday of LRY, Liberal Religious Youth, in the 60's and 70's, and other youthful forms of worship.

Now, this is all very interesting, you might be thinking – that Christianity used to be this rather different animal – but we have come so far from this, perhaps even *evolved* from this – how useful or practical is the suggestion that we should be more joyous and ecstatic in our religious practices today? After all, it's with our serious commitment to hard

work that we are able to *afford* what is defined as a happy Christmas in this day and age. Without a steady paycheck, there would be no Christmas tree or roast beast, no spiked eggnog, and certainly no great present unwrapping ecstasy for the children Christmas morning.

But I wish our children were more familiar with alternative forms that great joy can take – other than the joy of realizing their parents got them just what they wanted for Christmas. For they are receptive to it, as we saw two weeks ago, when the children sang in the new Children’s Choir. We have heard such inspiring accounts from parents about how their children have discovered how much they love to sing, and what a surprise this was to them. The truth is that, these days, music and singing is as close as participants of a Protestant service get to embodying joy – I’m sure members of both the adult choir and bell choir can attest to this, and I know a great many of you experience joy when we sing as a congregation.

What I would like to suggest this morning is that there is no reason this kind of experience of joy need be limited to religious practice. Our secular and religious lives simply don’t merge as much as they did for our forbears, so it’s important that we cultivate joy in all areas of our lives – in our work, in our families and friendships, in the civic service we do, and in our hobbies. The way we can do this is by becoming aware of how our own joyfulness can be a great gift to others. It does feel good to be generous this time of year – whether that’s with our volunteer hours, by visiting the lonely, or helping at a food bank; or by giving our treasure to charities, or yes, even finding those perfect gifts for the people you love. It’s exciting that today is the first Sunday of the Alternative Gift Market in the Chapel – check it out, and see all the ways you can combine generous gift-giving *and* the support of worthwhile causes that depend on the generosity of people like us.

There are so many ways to give the gift of joy this time of year, and it acts like a boomerang, bringing that joy right back to you, the more you give. I can tell you how I practice joy this time of year – it combines gift-giving and my favorite hobby, a standard form of joy, music. Throughout each year since 2003, I collect new music; as many of you know, I am hip to the music scene. At the end of the year, I make compilations of all my favorite songs, a creative hobby that brings me much joy. And then, I burn lots of CDs of these compilations, and send them to about 20 friends across the country, wishing them a Happy New Year. I know some of them probably don’t even listen to them – but about half of them tell me how much they look forward to receiving them every year. Music is therapy for the soul – especially during the winter blues – and so I think of this annual ritual as part of the spirituality I practice year-round. Music and dancing are my joy-machines, as well as my direct link to the divine, and for me, the most infallible sign of God’s presence. Even Kurt Vonnegut, a diehard humanist, once said that he also thought music was the best evidence for God’s existence.

What would you say is the best evidence for you? What brings you the most joy, and is it something you can give extra attention to this time of year? If you don’t think you have time, or that it’s just too selfish to self-indulge, I challenge you to reconsider that line of thinking. I challenge us to listen to the Jesus of old, the Jesus who has been lost from us for centuries, the Jesus who loved wine and meat, and who challenged us to let go of our worldly anxieties. There once was a Christianity for which authentic joy was a requirement of worship – I urge you to define your joy and make it happen, empower yourselves to empower joy in others, whether this be through fellowship, food, dance, or any other form of creative merriment. The real meaning of Christmas invites you to this pleasure, to experience the intense pleasure of being a part of this world and a part of the human family.

In the Colbert household, joy was embodied through affection and singing. He says, “In my family, we could hug each other and kiss each other anytime we wanted for no reason whatsoever, and we were encouraged to sing around the house.” The interviewer asks, “Would you all sing carols on Christmas Eve?” “Sure, we’d process through the house, and we still do it. My family is 50 people now – nieces and nephews and that sort of thing – and we process from the youngest to the oldest. The youngest puts the baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas Eve, and we sing ‘Silent Night.’ It’s very traditional.”

But lest I end on too traditional a note, let me share a rock song quotation. Who else would be an expert on just such spiritual joy, other than Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones? He has a solo album from 2001 that has a glorious gospel anthem called ‘Joy.’ He even sings it with Bono of U2. Here’s how it starts:

Oh joy, love you bring

Oh joy, you make my heart sing

When I drove across the desert,

I was in my four wheel drive,

I was looking for the Buddha,

But I saw Jesus Christ

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders

And lit a cigarette

He said jump for joy, make some noise,

Remember what I said –

There is much of what Jesus said in his ministry that is worth remembering – the teachings of Jesus call on us not only to be generous, but to be radically generous. Jesus sought to teach us that this was the secret to finding joy – this was the explicit association of joy with the person of Jesus, this was what salvation was actually about: that we find salvation in the giving of ourselves to others, and thereby the giving of ourselves over to joy, to actually surrendering to joy.

If we could sum up the ministry of Jesus in nutshell, it would be that enlightenment does not exist on some far away, inaccessible plane. It is always right here, right now, utterly available to us as soon as we avail ourselves to it. And so may we do just that this holiday season, this 2009 Advent, if only for a few magic moments – while our anxieties are real, may we find a way to lay them down, to lay down our egos, and lay down our notions of how our lives should be but aren't. May we wake up to the joy that offers herself to us in each present moment. May we wake up, and open those blinds wide to the world.