

From Happiness to Joy: Getting Ready for Christmas

Some years ago, a survey asked mental hospital patients, “What is your chief goal in life?” The most common response was “Happiness.” Amid the merriness of Christmas cheer, I dare to wonder: Could focusing on happiness reflect not a longing for healing, but rather, a mis-focus at the very root of mental illness itself?

Among a people whose Declaration of Independence proclaims “the pursuit of happiness” as an “inalienable right,” this question is not readily entertained. The composite cover photo of a recent *Newsweek* magazine story on “Boomers Turn 60” showed 25 notable Boomers, of whom at least 20 were entertainers or celebrities, as one *Letter to the Editor* scolded—“no judges, no scientists, no doctors, no entrepreneurs, no athletes, and only one current world leader. (11/28/05)”

Where the goal of life is happiness, entertainment becomes a full-bore industry if not obsession. Brokenness, struggle, risk, and heartache are minimized on the screen of life. “It’s Hard to Be Sad When You’re Eating Ice Cream,” as an ice cream store banner proclaimed near my seminary in Boston. And it’s true. In this often overwhelming world, we need some relief once in awhile. Mocha Almond Fudge I especially recommend. The problem in our over-fed, emotionally malnourished culture, however, is not staying happy when you’re eating ice cream. It’s finding meaning in your life when you’re not eating it.

Sooner or later in this real and unmanageably broken world, you have to stop eating ice cream (or doing whatever else that makes it hard for you to be sad)—if only when you fall asleep. At that point, if happiness is your life goal, you either dream your life away in the world’s high-definition, pain-relieving ice cream store, or submit to the crushing nightmare reality of your sadness.

Enter the mental hospital.

But what if God has set for us another life focus, more lasting and satisfying, certified not by a political declaration of independence, but rather, by a spiritual confession of dependence? What if that focus is gained not by our pursuit of it, but by its pursuit of us?

Enter Jesus. “Religion is our reaching to God,” it’s been said; “Jesus is God’s reaching to us.”

The problem is not that we can’t find happiness without ice cream or any of the countless other means of inducing it, but that we can’t find satisfaction without happiness (see Isaiah 55:1-2).

Happiness is not a legitimate goal for Christians. Not because, as the demon of Religion alleges, God is an exacting Judge, but because, as Jesus has demonstrated, He’s a loving Father who wants something far better for His children—namely, joy.

Because this world has fallen into a pervasive brokenness that separates us from God, all of us will suffer from and even mediate its painful effects. Among those who have not forgotten Him, however, God stirs hope. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has declared, “When all hope is gone, Jews invent new hope.” That’s why the coming of God in Jesus stirs us today not simply to be happy, but—like the Wise Men whom His Star beckoned long ago—to “rejoice exceedingly with great joy” (Matt. 2:10RSV). It’s why at Christmas, those who have suffered great pain and darkness and abandonment don’t sing, “Happiness to the World, Santa is coming!” but rather, fall on their knees and cry out at last, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come!”

Happiness is about present circumstances; I’m happy when things are going well. Joy is about history—a struggle endured, a deliverance revealed; a heart broken, a promise kept. Happiness is an incident; joy is a story. Happiness is the goal of human desire to overcome pain. Joy is the byproduct of God’s desire to use the natural pains of life to draw you to Himself. That’s how He reveals and fulfills your destiny. Joy may blossom in laughter, but it germinates in sadness.

When I come home from a ministry trip and see my wife, I smile because I'm happy to see her. But when I remember the years of longing before we met, the desperate battle to overcome deep pain and fear so I could receive her as my Father's blessing--I cry for joy. Joy, in fact, is a fruit of God's Spirit taking root in your life (Gal. 5:22). It's not the natural result of your effort, but the supernatural result of God's effort.

When I was a boy, my buddies all had pet dogs, and often brought them along on our forest hikes. Our family, however, had a cat. One day after school, I tried to bring my cat along with me on a solo hike. Gingerly, I carried him outside and set him down just inside the woods. Turning to the trail, I commanded him, dog-master-like, to "Come!" Yawning unaffected, my trusty companion examined his paw and casually began licking it. I commanded again, called, begged and pleaded--all to no avail. In desperation, I ran angrily to seize and carry the cat with me, but he leapt away quickly. Sighing in disgust, I gave up and decided to walk alone. Awhile later, as I stepped past a fallen tree, a dry leaf crunched behind me. Startled, I turned to see none other than my cat, following me at a dignified distance!

As a fruit of the Spirit, joy is the cat that can't be commanded or seized, but which follows you as you set out on the trail of life with Jesus. "I am the Vine, you are the branches," Jesus told His disciples. "When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant" (John 15:5 *The Message*). "I have told you these things," He explained, "so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (TEV 15:11).

Without that intimate and organic relationship with Jesus--crying out to Him in our brokenness and need, celebrating with Him in our triumphs and blessings—we lose relationship not only with God, but with each other. And our joy is incomplete. "I just got a call from my doctor," a friend once called me excitedly. "Two weeks ago, I went in for a check-up and he thought I had cancer. But the test came back today and I'm clean—no cancer at all! Halleluia! Let's go celebrate, brother!"

I stirred not at all. Startled and embarrassed by my indifference, I managed a brief smile. Yes, this was good news; "I'm happy for you," I responded, honestly. But I was not joyful, could not celebrate genuinely and deeply, because only those who "sow in tears" qualify to "reap with shouts of joy" (Ps. 126:5). My friend had not allowed me to sow any tears with him. And so in fact, I was angry at him. Why didn't he trust my strength enough to call me two weeks ago, when the wolf was at his door? Indeed, what if I got seriously ill—would I have to wait until I got better before calling him to pray for me? Eventually, I mustered the courage to tell him I wanted that mutual trust and support in our friendship, and together, we agreed. Happiness stirs with pleasure and focuses on me; joy stirs with gratitude and thereby focuses on something greater than yourself, even others.

Being happy with a friend is good. What's better is to struggle with him, get real before God and each other, and know the joy of real brotherhood

You want happiness? Eat some ice cream. I'll join you, happily, while the ice cream lasts.

You want joy? Sow some tears. I'll join you there, too. In fact, if you let me in on your pain, I'll stay--long after the ice cream is gone.

Christmas is coming. So get ready for joy. Forget the good life; let your Father give you the best life. Find a quiet place and ask Him to show you what He's done for you, especially acts of deliverance and blessing you never realized, or took for granted. Join as all heaven and nature sing: "Let earth (that's you) receive its King! Let every heart (that's yours) prepare Him room." Gratefully, that is, stay raw and open before Jesus. Give Him the Christmas gift He wants most, namely, your heart--even to break for His purposes. Let Him reveal and heal your own deepest wounds, and then, in that process of opening your heart, allow you to see the heart of others, to feel their pain and intercede actively to serve their need (2 Corinth. 1:1-5).

It's a gift He'll never forget. And neither will you.

