

An elderly man called his oldest daughter, Jane, to tell her that he and her mother were separating after 50 years of marriage. Jane went ballistic and called her brother and sister to give them the news. The siblings were all hopping mad by the time the youngest child, Bob, called the father back. "You and mom are NOT splitting up!" he yelled into the phone. "Jane, Karen and I are taking a plane tomorrow, and we'll see you both this weekend." -- click. The man then turned to his wife and chuckled, "The kids are coming for the weekend – and they're paying their own way!"

And one for the season: "Dear Santa, I've been good all year. Most of the time. Well, once in a while. Never mind, I'll buy my own stuff."

HAPPY GAUDETE or REJOICING Sunday. First, a little background on the gospel. We read "The crowds asked John the Baptist, 'What then should we do?'" And John replies with very concrete suggestions. Looks simple enough. But there is a lot more going on than we might initially notice. The life of faith entails both the inner and outer world. What we believe must find a way of expressing itself. There must be a connection between what we say and what we do. We have to put what we believe into action. When we *think* about acting in a good way, it always unfolds without a hitch. But when action is engaged in the real world, we quickly hesitate and stumble. Our desire to do something good is often undercut by our own mental conditioning, and previous experience.

We can imagine the spiritual paths of these groups of people who made the mistake of asking John what they should do. The crowds would find themselves holding onto their 2nd coat and extra bread and old sandals. "What is enough? I might need this later?" they think. "Should I jeopardize my future for someone who hasn't worked as hard as I have?" The tax collectors have made a lot of money cheating people. They ask themselves: "Can I afford a cutback in revenue? What about my house on Lake Galilee? And all the other tax collectors act this way. I'll lose the job to someone who can play the game better than I can if I change." And soldiers, by definition, pushed people around. After all, they don't teach dancing. Who would know they were soldiers if they stopped bullying people, threatening to denounce them falsely, and making a little on the side? Their pay was meant to be supplemented in this way. When we try to change morally, we have to work on the inside to sustain different behavior on the outside.

Spiritual teaching tells us that any outer action will inevitably lead to the discovery of inner reluctances and obstacles. John the Baptist is about removing obstacles. The first step is to discover what ARE the obstacles. And the best way to discover that is to try to do something that entails a change in the way we have previously operated. So what seems like simple advice from John the Baptist becomes a journey of self-discovery – leading to being a whole new person, which puts us back to the heart of the gospel – conversion, change of heart. (adapted from John Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 10-11)

Second, all of what I have said so far could be summed up by the words of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." So some reflection on joy, on this Gaudete or Rejoicing Sunday. I don't know where we ever got the idea that religion – and church – is supposed to be so darn serious! I've had several people write to me since I got here, telling me that I shouldn't tell jokes in church, people shouldn't be talking in church, that church is serious business and we shouldn't be laughing – or clapping in church. Says who? Did they ever attend an ordination to priesthood or being a bishop? CLAPPING is part of the ceremony! The Second Vatican Council teaches in its document on the Liturgy that "The Church earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators...."(SSC

#48) How are we ever going to become a community of prayer if we don't even speak to one another? There is no rule against telling jokes in church – as I reminded you with the RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter Joke, there is a long tradition of telling jokes in church. But we all know some people who are joy-carriers. And some who are not. When we are around the joy-carriers, they breathe life into us. We need to prize them – and thank them. Because there are other people in our lives – people who have rejected joy, who have decided to be victims. They don't want us to be joyful either. They are like the black holes of outer space: If we allow it, they will suck the joy right out of us.

A farmer had a neighbor, a constant complainer, a wet blanket in the linen closet of life. The farmer decided to impress this man for once in his existence, so he bought the world's greatest hunting dog, trained it thoroughly, and invited his joyless friend to go hunting. He showed the neighbor how his dog could stand motionless for an hour and pick up a scent a mile away. No response. From the blind the farmer shot a duck, which landed in the middle of the lake. Upon command, the dog trotted out, *walked on the surface of the water*, retrieved the bird, and dropped him at the feet of his master. "What do you think of that?" the farmer challenged the still dour-faced neighbor. To which his friend responded, "Your dog can't swim, can't he?"

We all know people like that. We all have to endure some joy-destroying people in life. We need to love them as best we can, but we also to be very careful not to let them shape us. We need to remember the great line from the Book of Proverbs: "Smiling faces make us feel happy." Smiling just makes people feel better. (adapted from John Ortberg, *THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED*, p. 69-70) In the fifth chapter of Galatians, when St. Paul names the 9 fruits of the Holy Spirit, JOY is second in his list, right after LOVE. So we know it is a big deal. Jesus came not only to deliver us from sin so that we can approach ourselves with love and love other people, but He came to infuse us with joy. French Jesuit Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God." In our second reading today, St. Paul writes to the church a COMMAND: "REJOICE in the Lord always. I say it again: REJOICE" It's a great attitude to live each day, and a great attitude to bring into church. Rejoice, you're in God's house now. It's time to lay aside your worries, heartaches, be done with your resentments, dry your tears and forget about past hurts. Focus on what God in His mercy has done for us – and rejoice. Admittedly, it's easier said than done, but it IS God's will for us. REJOICE.

When Blaise Pascal was converted – you know about Pascal – one of the guys that helped invent calculus? I know you were just dying to find out who that was. It was Blaise. He was about 9 years old when he was sent to his room to be punished. And that afternoon, he invented calculus. It was his way of getting back at everybody! But this brilliant scholar, who Einstein called "the greatest mind of the last thousand years," wrote in his diary: "I met him, not the God of the philosophers, not the God of the mathematicians, not the God of the scientists, but the God of Abraham, Moses and Jacob. Joy, joy, joy! Fire, fire fire! Joy, fire. Joy, fire. Unspeakable joy, oh, the ecstasy of the joy of the Lord!" (adapted from Wilimon, *SERMONS FROM DUKE CHAPEL*) And you didn't think math could be fun! Sometimes our over-emphasis on orthodoxy and dogma has sucked the joy right out of our life of discipleship. Jesus HAD to have been a joyful person – otherwise people would not have flocked to Him. No one flocks to a sourpuss.

But joy doesn't mean that we walk around laughing all the time. Joy just comes from a deep down stance that knows that God is in charge of the world. And when we surrender to that, all of our external circumstances – no matter how challenging they are at any given moment – cannot take away our deep seated joy. Molly Kelly wrote: "All of us have happy moments in our lives, but happiness is not joy. Joy comes only when you have peace. Happiness is often skin-deep, and fleeting; joy penetrates to our very soul; it is lasting. Happiness is a feel-good thing; joy can come with suffering. Happiness is often linked with winning; joy often comes with surrender." (Johann Christoph Arnold, *SEEKING PEACE*, p. 205)

Third, a story to illustrate.

Many of you probably have heard of Joni Eareckson Tada. She is a very joyful woman. She is also quadriplegic. Physically impaired due to a diving accident – she has a prime excuse to wallow in despair. But she knows about joy.

Joni tells about being surrounded by a crowd of women in a restroom during a break at a conference where she was the featured speaker. One woman said, “Oh, Joni, you always look so together so happy in your wheelchair. I wish that I had your joy!” Several women around her nodded. “How do you do it?” she asked.

Joni glanced at the nicely dressed women around her. She knew that the break would soon be over. How could she answer this woman’s question in about 60 seconds? How could she sum up in a sound bite what had taken her three decades to learn?

“I don’t do it,” she said. That raised their eyebrows. “In fact, may I tell you honestly how I woke up this morning?” Several women leaned against the counter to listen.

“This is an average day,” she breathed deeply. “After my husband Ken, leaves for work at 6:00 am, I’m alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00 am. That’s when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, ‘Oh, Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don’t have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources left. I don’t have a smile to take into this day. But YOU do. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.’”

“So, what happens when your friend comes through the bedroom door?” one of the women asked.

“I turn my head toward her,” said Joni, “and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It’s not mine. It’s God’s. And so,” she said, gesturing to her paralyzed legs, “whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning.” The women in the restroom were silent. “And,” said Joni, “it’s the only way to live. It’s the Christian way to live.”

So, if we’re going through a difficult time right now, and it feels like it’s beyond our power to smile, that’s all right. We just need to remember that far beneath the surface, where nobody else can see, there is an inexpressible joy that is available to each of us. It is the joy of the resurrected Christ. We just need to ask Him to give us HIS joy, so that even if that smile never makes it to our face, it will reside in our heart. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2002, p. 6)

May we all receive that kind of joy in our lives this day – and always. Gaudete in Dominum! Rejoice in the Lord! Now and forever. Amen.