

A young woman saw a funeral procession going by. There was a black hearse, followed by an older woman leading a pit bull on a leash, and after that was another hearse, and behind that was a line of 200 women, walking single file. The young woman walked up to the older woman and said, "I'm sorry to intrude on your moment of grief, but I can't help asking, whose funeral is this?"

The woman said, "Well, my husband is in that hearse in front of me. The pit bull killed him when it discovered him with his girlfriend. She's in that hearse behind me."

The young woman said, "Can I borrow that dog?" The old woman replied, "Get in line."

OK, this is GAUDETE, or Rejoicing Sunday. I'd like to do a bit of reflection on happiness and joy, using as my springboard that beautiful passage from Isaiah which speaks of the blooming desert, the glory of Lebanon, the splendor of God, and leaping like a stag and singing with everlasting joy.

If I were to ask you -- "are you happy", how would you answer that? My experience is that this is often a painful question which, given our fantasies of what happiness should be, we would tend to answer in the negative. We might say something like "No, I don't think I'm happy. I would like to be, but there are too many limitations and frustrations in my life which block happiness."

To stare the question of our happiness square in the face can make us more unhappy. A torturous self-scrutiny can result from it. What this suggests is that perhaps it is not the right question to ask in the first place. To ask myself: "Am I happy?" is to confuse things and to begin to demand things from life and from God that are not realistic. For us as believers, there is a better question: "Is my life meaningful?" That is a different question, and one which can help purify our perspective on things.

What God has promised us in Christ is not, as is unfortunately so often preached and believed, a life free from pain, sickness, loneliness, oppression, and death. The person who tells us that we will have less pain in life if we follow Jesus is not in touch with the gospel. What the incarnation promises is not that Christ will do away with our pain, but that God will be with us in that pain. That is something quite different. In fact, we can go further and say the opposite: If we take the gospel seriously, we will probably have more pain in life because we will be a more sensitive and compassionate person. We will be attuned to the pain of others.

To take the gospel seriously is not to be given immunity from the human condition. No. For the disciple of Christ, as for everyone else, there will be the same sicknesses, the same cold lonely seasons, the same painful frustrations, the same choices regretted, and the same bitter losses. Like everyone else, too, eventually we will have to face death. Faith in God does not, in this world, save us from suffering, nor does it offer a life free of pain. What God does promise is to be with us in that pain. That is why our Savior's name is Emmanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us.

To have faith in God is to have God with us. Avery Dulles wrote: "Jesus enables us to believe that human life, with all its contradictions, is the place where God is preeminently found. Unlike every other mythology, the story of the Incarnation gives us strength to face up to the harsh realities of our broken world, to feel and to transmit the touch of God's reconciling love. The Incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape from the ambiguities of this life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather it enables us to

burrow deep into the heart of the planet earth and find it shimmering with divinity.” I love that line – burrowing into the heart of our planet to find it shimmering with divinity. God is in it all!

For us as followers of Christ, the important question is not: “Am I happy?” but “Is my life meaningful?” By asking this latter question, we do not torture ourselves with some unattainable romantic ideal and, more importantly, we do not ask God to exempt us from the human condition. Our lives are meaningful when we sense God’s presence in the midst of our suffering, sickness, loneliness, and pain. Our faith should never pressure us to ask God to exempt us from these. Why should we be spared the human condition? Christ certainly was not. In fact He embraced it more deeply than any of us would ever dream. Rather our faith should allow us to stand inside of every reality in life, positive and negative, and see some meaning in it.

“Is my life meaningful?” When we ask the question this way the perspective is very different. Now happiness will no longer depend upon never getting sick, or lonely, or being misunderstood, or never making wrong choices, or on somehow being exempt from death. Life can be frustrating and still be very meaningful. We can be lonely, sick, sorrowful about wrong choices, over-worked and under appreciated, mourning the loss of someone we deeply love, staring old age and death in the face and still experience deep meaning. Happiness will be a by-product of that meaning. (adapted from Rolheiser, “Happiness and Meaning,” Posting of 9/20/2018)

And while that’s the deeper context, it’s a bit more serious than I want to end on Gaudete Sunday. So second, it can be a pretty joyless world out there. I was in New York – that can be a pretty joyless place. I got on an express elevator; it was full of dead, joyless people. And when I got on, I did something I always wanted to do – and I thought, “Hey, nobody here has ever seen me before – or will ever see me again.” I waited for the door to close – you know how people stand and look at the door and look at the numbers. And as soon as the doors closed, I turned. I smiled at everybody and in New York they can’t handle that. They kind of backed away from me. And I said, “Lighten up guys, lighten up. We’re going to be traveling together for a little while. What do you say we sing?” And they were so shocked by me, they did. I mean you should have been there. They were holding their attache cases singing “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” I got off at the 70th floor and this guy got off with me. I said, “Are you going to the same meeting I am going to?” He said, “No, I just wanted to finish the song.”

And you might ask, what in the world has this got to do with being a Christian? Jesus came not only to deliver us from sin so that we can approach ourselves and others with love, but He also came to give us joy. And the second fruit of the Spirit named by St. Paul in Galatians 5 is JOY, immediately after LOVE. JOY. JOY. (I took this story from Will Willimon, and told it first person for effect and slightly adapted it)

There is a Talmudic story of a rabbi meeting up with Elijah the prophet. The rabbi was in the marketplace when he came upon Elijah. He asked the prophet whether there were any in the marketplace who merited a place in the world to come. Perhaps the rabbi was hoping that Elijah would assure him that his piety and wisdom would earn him that reward.

Instead, Elijah pointed to 2 men and said, ‘Yes, those 2.’ The rabbi approached the 2 men and asked them who they were and what they did. They replied, ‘We are jesters. We make sad people laugh. And when we see 2 people arguing, we make peace between them.’ A serious purpose indeed. (James Martin, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MIRTH, p. 83) Oscar Wilde said “Some people light up a room when they walk in. Other people light up a room when they walk out.” We want to be in the light up category with our lives.

Third, a story about true joy. It's taken from the Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle, in his book TATOOS ON THE HEART. Boyle works with kids and young adults who have been ensnared by gangs in Los Angeles and runs HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES, which gives them a job and new start in life. He writes: "I had only met him recently and come to know his story. He isn't 19 yet and works as an orderly, moving patients and equipment, a job he secured through HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES. Spider is from a gang in Aliso Village, where he and his sister mainly raised themselves, having been abandoned by their parents. I was never quite sure how they duped the authorities into thinking there was a responsible adult around. He and his lady, with 2 small sons, now live in an apartment in Highland Park, several bus rides away.

"Get in, dog, I'll take ya home." ('Dog' is the way street gangs speak to one another, and Boyle uses their language). "We speak of many things as we go, and I question him about his bills and rent and how he's faring. I've helped him get jump-started in this regard a few times already.

'I'm ok,' he says, then steers off in a whole other direction. 'You know what I'm gonna do when I get home right now? I'm gonna sit down to eat with my lady, and my two little ones. But, well.... I don't eat. I just watch them eat. My lady she gets crazy with me, but I don't care. I just watch 'em eat. They eat and eat. And I just look at 'em and thank God they're in my life. When they're done eating and I know they're full, THEN I eat.'

'And the truth....sometimes there's food left and sometimes there isn't. You know,' he says to me, putting his hand on my shoulder as I drive, 'it's a Father thing.' The duty to delight is to stare at your family as they eat, anchored in the surest kind of gratitude – the sort that erases sacrifice and hardship and absorbs everything else. Jesus says, 'My ways are not your ways,' but they sure could be. In the utter simplicity of breathing, we find how naturally inclined we are to delight and to stay dedicated to gladness. So forget about what's under your tree on Christmas – or isn't. Enjoy the real stuff, the real Christmas – the gift of an immense divine love into this often loveless world. Enjoy Christmas mass. Enjoy the meal. Enjoy your family – or whoever is your family that day because you are away from home. Just bask in God's unalloyed joy, and let loose with the same joy in whoever is in front of us. Never forget what a vital part of our nature this is – to be glad and to be grateful. Gaudete in Domino! Rejoice in the Lord. Always and forever Amen. (adapted, p. 149-150)