

“Re-opening to Joy”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I am going to take the risk and say that all of us can agree with Brené Brown when she says that; “Joy is not a constant.” During the course of our lives we have moments of joy interspersed with a wide range of other emotions. Sometimes we may have difficulty finding and feeling joy. This is the case even in the best of times. But we have not been living in the best of times for many months. With the emergence of the COVID virus and the ensuing global pandemic, we have been, and continue to be, in the midst of an extremely uncertain and difficult time.

In an attempt to provide a sense of the uncertainty and difficulty I speak of, I would use the metaphor of darkness to describe this pandemic period we are living in. It is as if we have been thrust into a large room which has practically no visible light. The dark room contains a poisonous black snake, possibly more than one, that slithers around the room silently. We can't see or hear it, but we know it is there. Because the snake's poisonous bite could be fatal, we certainly don't want to go feeling around on the floor to find it. We know, almost instinctively, that we have to avoid getting close to the snake in order to stay alive. We aren't in the room alone, there are many others there with us. Every now and then we hear someone say, or possibly scream, that they have been bitten. We do our best to keep our distance from the area where the scream emerged. We are fearful, possibly to the point of being terrified. In such a situation many of us would do just what the vast majority of us were instructed to do early in the pandemic. We would stay right where we were. Many of us would freeze in place since we wouldn't be able to flee from or fight the snake that we had no way of locating. Fleeing, fighting and freezing in place are three of the most universally utilized survival mechanisms we humans, along with many other mammals, utilize when we experience a significant threat. As we approach a COVID death toll in the U.S. of 800,000 people, there is no arguing that this virus is a significant and serious threat.

There would come a point, however, when we could no longer stay frozen in place, we would have to move. Eventually we would need to sit or lie down. And there would come a time when we would need to relieve our bladders and our bowels, if that hadn't happened as soon as we became aware of the poisonous snake. And as time would pass, we would eventually be unable to tolerate or sustain the level of emotional alert and alarm that we initially experienced. Living in constant fear or terror is untenable for anyone and everyone. So even though the threat would still be present, we would need to find a way to diminish, or at least distract ourselves from, our emotional response to the threat. One approach that many if not all of us would eventually utilize to deal with the intensity of our initial emotional response would be to numb our senses to some degree.

I share this metaphor of a dark room and the snake knowing that it is not a completely accurate description of what we have been going through. Some might claim that this metaphor is an exaggeration. While it isn't totally accurate and may be an exaggeration, I believe there is truth in it. For example, we have all felt some type of fear related to the pandemic. Maybe the fear has been of personally contracting the virus. Maybe the fear has been that a loved one may contract the virus, with the potential of death as a result. Possibly the fear has been that we would lose our job or our ability to financially support ourselves or our family. Or the fear could have been, or still, is that we would lose one or another freedom that we value highly. The fear has been present for so long, and at such an intensity, that we have exceeded our capacity to tolerate it. To continue forward on the journey of life it is essential that we have a reprieve. We need some glimmer of hope. We need to believe that there is something other than dread that lies ahead. We need to hold on to the possibility that we will again experience moments of joy in our lives. We have endured so much time in the dark room with the snake that it is quite possible another statement from our reading by Brené Brown may apply. “Other times we are so afraid of the dark that we don't dare let ourselves enjoy the light.” I would say we may not have been able to even see the light that exists. There has been so little light in these

dark times that we may not have been able to see the flickers when they occur. As a result, we may have missed the brief blips of light, and joy, that have been, and are, present. This is quite possibly what happened to Nana in our Story for All Ages. Or possibly we have been wanting or even expecting joy to come from things that are currently not appropriate or even possible to engage in. It is extremely probable that to one degree or another, we have unconsciously numbed our feelings as a way to cope with the continuing experience of fear, loss, grief and uncertainty that we have to face every day. Such numbing, however, doesn't just affect what we would consider to be the undesirable emotions, it typically numbs our ability to feel the full range of emotions. This numbing occurs as a type of shielding or armor that gets created, not just in our minds but throughout our entire body. This shielding or armor may reduce the amount of fear, sorrow or grief we feel, but it also makes us less able to experience feelings such as joy and happiness.

While the number of COVID cases locally are declining, the pandemic is not yet a thing of the past. Many, if not most or even all of us, want to be done with it. We want to move on with our lives and resume doing the things that gave us joy prior to its arrival. I would like to say to you that the threat is over and we can now safely fully engage again with everything we used to do. I wish I could say that, but my mother taught me that it is important to tell the truth. So I want to tell the truth and, where possible, I want to point out that which is positive. Those of us who have gotten fully vaccinated and boosted against the virus are far safer now than before. And when we wear masks and follow social distancing guidelines, the likelihood of getting infected with the virus are reduced significantly. The snake is still in the room but there is some light shining under the doors and through some cracks that have developed in the walls.

Many of us are ready and even eager to start doing things we have missed out on for the past 19+ months. We may be ready and eager, but, without knowing it, we may still be carrying the emotional shielding or armor that we put in place to lessen the fear, the loss, the grief and the uncertainty that we have had to endure. The shielding or armor has been there for so long now it is quite probable that we aren't even aware it exists. The shielding or armor that I am talking about here is quite common and a natural human response. The shielding or armor reminds me of an issue I am dealing with, an issue I know many others who are close to my age can relate to. I have cataracts which limit my ability to see. These cataracts limit the amount of light that gets to the retina of my eye so I don't see the world as brightly or as colorfully as I did in the past. If my cataracts suddenly disappeared, I might need sunglasses even on a day when there was a layer of thin clouds. Since my body hasn't needed to adjust to that much light in a while it might need help initially. A similar thing may occur as the shielding or armor we carry begins to drop away. We likely won't be able to handle the full intensity of all of our emotions, both unpleasant as well as pleasant, for a time.

As the threat of the pandemic recedes, which it will, we will need to re-open to all of our emotions in order to catch the joy that, as Brené Brown states, "comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments" of life. We would benefit from making a practice of noticing such moments in our everyday lives, and noticing them now, even while COVID is still in our midst. The practice I am talking about here doesn't involve having to resume activities that have been avoided or given up since the COVID outbreak began. I am talking about finding the very small moments in every day that can elicit joy. To do this will require that we open our senses and drop our shield of armor for very brief periods, possibly just a few seconds. Let me offer some examples here. Over the past month I have been taking time many mornings and evenings to notice the sunrise or the sunset. Lately there have been several that have been very beautiful, even with my cataracts. Along with sunrises and sunsets, I recently witnessed the tiniest sliver of a moon that I have seen in my lifetime. It was only visible for a few minutes before the dawn's increasing light made it impossible to see. And seeing the brightness and beauty of fresh snow on the nearby peaks brightens my spirits and my day. These are just a few examples in my life where I experience joy in the ordinary moments. I encourage you to think about, and to look for, such moments in your own life. And it can be helpful to write those moments down for future reference. During our service last Sunday, Rev. Tandi Rogers recommended that we practice joy as a spiritual discipline. I would suggest that one aspect of such a spiritual discipline could be to keep a joy journal that you write in and refer to, often. A joy journal can offer you a boost when your emotional reserves are low, or when you are feeling raw and vulnerable.

Re-opening to joy, like getting into physical shape after not being able to exercise for an extended period of time, will take effort, time and practice. It would be beneficial for any and all of us to put effort, time and practice into recognizing joy moments that occur on a daily basis. And we will need to find ways to reduce and hopefully eventually eliminate the emotional shielding or armor that has built up through the course of these very difficult times. This shielding or armor isn't visible but it exists throughout our bodies. I would encourage each of us, and all of us, to be compassionate and gentle with ourselves as we dismantle this shielding or armor and re-open to joy. It will be important that we not create expectations which we are unable to achieve. That is a set-up for disappointment. Instead of focusing on some expectation we set or hold, I would suggest that we focus on the small steps, the simple accomplishments, in our everyday lives. As I stated in a sermon some months ago, we are all in the midst of a long-term traumatic event. We will all need time to recover from this experience. With compassion, consideration, patience and a practice of opening to the precious moments of joy that occur in the ordinary events of our lives, I have faith that, in due time, we will see a brighter day and be able to bath in the joy of that moment.

So may it be