

“Spreading Joy”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on December 26, 2021

Christmas Day 2021 is now a memory. My hope is that the memories you have of it bring a smile to your face and leave you with a warm feeling in your heart. The time leading up to and including Christmas is a period that is often associated with words like joy, peace and good will towards all people. Many of the Christmas cards I received and sent this year include messages that contain the words, or the thoughts, I just mentioned. I imagine the same is true for many of you. It is likely that all of us wish for more joy, peace and good will towards all people, not just during the Christmas season but for the entire year. On this day after Christmas, I invite us to consider what we might do to further the sentiment that is expressed so often, and in so many ways, prior to and on Christmas Day.

It seems to me that it is especially important this year that we seek to find ways to increase joy, peace and good will toward all. After twenty one months of living with the threat posed by the COVID virus, we have reached or exceeded our ability to cope with the impacts caused by the pandemic. With the recent arrival and rapid spread of Omicron, the latest variant of the virus, many people were unable or unwilling to gather with family and loved ones this Christmas. This was the case for my 97 year old mother who is in a nursing home in Michigan. She decided not to go to my sister’s home for Christmas yesterday. She made the decision out of concern about how many people would be there, and the possibility that one of those family members might have COVID and unknowingly spread it to her and the others. Cases of COVID are surging in Michigan to the point that many hospitals are filled beyond capacity. In situations such as this, it can be very difficult to feel joy and peace, or to have good will towards all people, when some don’t take the steps that could reduce the spread of the virus.

With all that we have been through over these many months, and with what we may yet need to deal with in the weeks and months ahead, I believe this is a time when we need to find and feel all of the joy and peace we possibly can. And as we find and feel joy and peace, even in the smallest or simplest things, I would advise that we share it, wherever and whenever possible, with others. This is the message Sandra and Berit shared with us during our Story for All Ages this morning. It is important and beneficial to pass it on. As I watched them read the story together, I could see the flashes of joy on each of their faces. And seeing those moments of joy brought a smile of joy to my face. I hope the same occurred for you. Thank you, Sandra and Berit, for demonstrating so clearly and so well just what I wanted this service to convey today.

Some of you may be having difficulty being joyful these days. That is certainly understandable. Life may be so uncertain, challenging or even painful right now that experiencing joy could seem unimaginable. Or maybe you can imagine joy but only as a fantasy that couldn’t be real. We are living in a very difficult time right now. That is one of the reasons I chose the reading for this morning. The reading speaks clearly and directly to living with pain and difficulty, while also holding out hope and expectation for joy.

In the book our reading comes from, Kaur writes in some detail about spending time at the bedside of her good friend, Joyce, who was a mother figure for her. Joyce had multiple myeloma, a type of cancer found in the plasma cells in a person’s bones. The night before Joyce’s death, Valerie sat at her bedside holding her hand. She was there as Joyce took her final, labored breath. Upon realizing that Joyce was no longer breathing Kaur writes that she wept. She was filled with grief at the loss. Yet even in her grief she did what she had promised Joyce she would do. Joyce was a member of the Sikh religious tradition, as is Kaur, so Kaur began gently washing Joyce’s body as a first step in preparation for burial. Kaur washed the body through her tears. The following morning Kaur became aware that she was pregnant. She had just experienced the ending of one life and felt the pain and grief of that loss. She would soon bring about a new life and feel the pain and joy of birth. As we heard in our reading, “Joy is possible even in the great labors—the labor of dying, the labor of birthing and the labors in between.” We are living in the midst of a time when great labors present themselves daily. With over 800,000 COVID related deaths in the U.S., and with the loss of so much we had come to take

for granted, we find ourselves needing to birth a new way of living, a new way of being. That birth will involve pain and struggle. It can, and I believe will, also involve joy and new possibilities.

I mention Kaur's religion for a reason. I mention it to illustrate that religious traditions other than Christianity also lift up the significance and importance of joy. Numerous religious traditions encourage or even implore their followers to seek and share joy. I have heard from some of you that you watched the film, *Mission Joy: Finding Happiness in Troubled Times*. I had sent information out on the UUFb listserv in November. The email I sent gave information about how to view the film at no cost since UUFb is a partner congregation of Montana Interfaith Power and Light. The film is a documentary of the friendship between His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Christian. The film was inspired by the book titled, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, which was a New York Times bestseller. In the film both of these icons of their religious faith traditions spoke about joy. They shared the importance joy plays in their beliefs, in their faith traditions, and in their lives. And in the film, both shared about the difficulties, the hardships, and the suffering they went through at various points in their lives which made it possible for them to feel the level of joy they now experience in their later years. I will offer a couple of examples so those of you who haven't seen the film can get an idea of the types of difficulties, hardships and suffering each of them experienced.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama was taken from his family when he was a very young child to live in a Buddhist temple in Tibet. There he was taught by the monks in the monastery to prepare him to be the Dalai Lama, the religious leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Once at the monastery he never again experienced the nurturing or the love of his mother. And in his early adult years he was forced to leave Tibet as the Chinese invaded and took over the country of his birth. He has been in exile ever since. And Archbishop Tutu spent years in a South African prison for speaking out bravely and eloquently against the systemic racism, often referred to as apartheid, in his country. Both men shared about the pain and the suffering these experiences brought to their lives. And both shared that it was not in spite of these experiences that they are joyful today. Instead, it was because of these experiences they can feel deep joy. Each told of how these experiences opened their eyes, their senses and their hearts to a level of joy that would not have been possible without the pain and suffering they faced. I found it especially moving when the two men agreed that joy is essential to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of all humans. Both also talked of the importance of joy in their religious faith traditions. While there are some major areas between their two religious faith traditions where beliefs are quite different, the significance and importance of joy was an area where they shared common ground. If you haven't seen this film, I encourage you to take the time to watch it when the opportunity presents itself.

By now, I hope I have made it clear that the challenging times we are living in do not preclude the possibility of encountering and experiencing joy. The challenging times— the times of "great labor" as Valerie Kaur puts it—are the times that prepare the soil of our soul for an even greater harvest of joy than otherwise would have been possible. Since the challenges that COVID brought with it began, I have been searching for an experience from my past that would allow me to think about the struggles and difficulties of today in different way, in a way that holds at least some degree of positivity. I have been trying to come up with a way to recognize the pain, the loss and the grief while also allowing the joy, the peace, and the hope to be present in life as it is now. As I was writing today's sermon I came up with a memory, an experience, that I think fits with what we are dealing with and offers a positive perspective that I, and possibly we, can utilize.

As I have shared in the past, I grew up in a small town that was surrounded by agricultural land. Most of that land was planted in crops such as corn, beans, wheat, and pickles. There were also a few folks who raised livestock. One such place was a dairy farm that was less than two miles from the center of town. Whenever the wind was out of the southwest everyone in town was reminded of the dairy farm's presence by the smell in the air. But that wasn't the only time people were made aware of the dairy farm. Every spring the dairy farm would offer the excess manure that had built up over the winter to local crop farmers. The crop farmers would then spread it on their fields to enhance the growing potential of their soil. I recall as a youth thinking that spreading the manure had to be the worst possible job imaginable. And yet, because of that person and the job they did, the crops grown on the land thrived. The son of the dairy farm owner played

trombone in the high school band as did I. He once told me that his father never sold the manure, he just shared it with other farmers. In return, the farmers he shared it with would share a portion of their crops with the dairy owner and his family. The manure from their dairy helped nourish the soil, which then grew crops more abundantly. The farmers, the dairy owner's family, as well as many others in the community benefited from the food that was produced. The sharing and spreading of the manure eventually led to the sharing and the spreading of good food and good will in the community.

Today, there is more than enough pain, suffering, and loss to go around. We don't need any more. What we need is to find the joys that exist even in the midst of the really awful parts of life—of the manure that life is presenting and spreading all around us. And when we find those joys, we need to do what we can to spread them, to share them, with others, just as the farmers in my home community shared the nourishing crops they grew with the dairy farmer and others. As we experience and spread joy freely and openly, we may bring a smile to another's face, or offer hope to someone who has been lacking it. Finding and then spreading joy is one way that we can express and encourage good will towards all people. Finding, and then spreading joy, is one way that we can make the meaning of Christmas real in our lives and in the lives of others. In closing let us hear again the words of Valerie Kaur.

I believe laboring in joy is the meaning of life. May we look up at that night sky. May we let joy in. For we will be someone's ancestors one day. If we do this right, they will inherit not our fear but bravery born of joy.

So may it be.