

Joy: the Companion of Our Capacities

- *Third Sunday of Advent*
- *December 11, 2011*
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Rejoice in the Lord always.
Again I say rejoice.
My God is the joy of my soul.
I rejoice heartily in the Lord.
He sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
Rejoice always.
My soul rejoices in my God.
My spirit finds joy in God my Savior.

Clearly this is the Sunday of joy in Advent. What is joy and what does it mean to find joy in God?

Look at a 15-month old toddler girl as she runs and weaves on wobbly legs across the room, arms flailing, or scoots away from mom in a lobby. That's joy: it comes forth when she fulfills her capacity to run and her incipient human capacity to be on her own. Later she'll run a marathon and find a quieter, deeper joy in actuating the capacity to do something hard, to endure, to complete. Observe a little boy pushing buttons on a toy and his glee as lights flash and bells ring; then see him twist every knob on your entertainment center, and later play video games, or pilot a plane. That's joy which goes with the human capacity to touch things and make things happen. Watch people's joy in dancing; there seems to be a human capacity—at least for some but not for all of us—to dance, have rhythm, move with abandon. Hear the Seattle U. choirs sing Lee Peterson's "Sanctus" and then hear them erupt with ecstatic shouts: that's joy in making beautiful harmony and joy in celebrating the creative gifts of another. Watch, if you could, Fr. Dave shushing down Crystal Mountain; that's joy that accompanies his capacity to ski and to let go; but there is also a much quieter joy when he is with a family for two hours at the bedside of a dying person; that's the joy which accompanies his capacity to console. Take in ASSU president, Katie Wieliczkiewicz, mischievously clinking a glass of red wine with Fr. Steve at a cocktail party and see how it's joy which accompanies her capacity to be grown up and to be on the same level as her university president. (It was clear to me she had long known how to do this and had much practice of this human capacity!)

Joy is what accompanies the actuation of any of our human capacities: to do, to think, to create, to read, to relate, to sing, to accomplish, to love. Every human capacity, when actuated, is attended by joy. We don't aim for or seek to attain joy in itself. It is a by-product, a side-effect, something that goes with, accompanies the fulfilling of our human capacities. Joy is the companion of our capacities. It's not one thing and not a certain feeling. "Show me the capacity and I'll show you the joy."

On this Sunday of joy in Advent, when we are told, “rejoice in the Lord always”, or “my God is the joy of my soul”, or “my spirit finds joy in God my Savior”, what we are being told is that to be human is to be a capacity for God, nothing less than a capacity to be filled by God, and that our true joy—toward which all the others point and are meant to help us—is experienced in our capacity for God, when God actually fills us. The very definition of what it means to be human is to be a capacity for God. True human joy is found when this defining capacity for God is realized by our being emptied, opened, receptive so that God fills us. We are meant for joy, not because God is joy; God is love; joy comes as the companion of God loving us, as the companion of being that capacity for God which we were created to be and to which all other joys point.

Have you noticed that I haven’t said that joy is a feeling? Oh, it may be, and many times it is, but sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is more like a state of being, dependent on faith, and sometimes it is simply a mystery lived.

I recently visited a poor woman in her tenement apartment, an African-American woman of great faith facing long months of chemotherapy for a virulent form of cancer, an alumna of ours whom a generous friend heard about and asked if I would bring her some modest financial help as an anonymous gift from him. It is unusual for me to walk into poverty and threat like that. It is even more unusual to experience a spirit like hers. She said to me, “No matter what happens, whether I live or die, I am victorious!” She was radiant. That is joy; that is being the capacity for God she was created to be. I don’t think we do that joy justice by calling it a feeling. It is so much more than that, quieter, deeper, truer, not just felt, but held in faith, maybe even contradicted in her pain and fears. “Victorious!”

Another person in a locked-down nursing home, suffering from dementia, baptized but distanced from faith for 60 years, told me she is content to be in a confused state about who she is, peacefully pondering by the hour the mystery of life, knowing her human unimportance, not feeling alone, bringing her mother and her husband back to life to converse lovingly with her, not afraid of dying, saying that there are no loose threads to her life, that all is accepted. She tells me as I leave that she will be at peace and in joy the whole rest of the day, but I am sure that in a few moments she’ll not remember that I was there. Yes, that too is joy. I am convinced that what she is living is almost a pure capacity for God, all in mystery and not wrapped in faith. Again, calling that a feeling seems to me to belittle it or skim the surface of what joy in God more truly or deeply is. Her spirit finds joy in God her Savior, but she doesn’t know it.

On this Sunday of joy in Advent, of finding joy in God, can each of us ask—not for joy—but how we can be more truly a capacity of God, in prayer, in our families, in this university, in love, in hope, and can we leave to God, who is the only one who can fulfill our human capacity, to bring with Him whatever companion of joy he wishes and knows we need. Let’s take a moment to ask for that as we move into these closing weeks of Advent and Christmas.