

# JOY THAT BRINGS DEPTH TO LIFE

## 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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6 May 2018

This is the season to begin thinking about gardening, or maybe you've already begun. Mulch is being delivered. I see it all over town, sitting in large piles on the edges of driveways, covered with tarps. Landscapers, like our own CJ, have had their hands happily in the dirt for a few weeks now. Coleman Gardens has tomatoes started in their high tunnel. We begin to notice the earth around us and what's growing.

When you walk through the woods, you can observe the trees that have come down over the winter, and you'll see that last year's tree trunks are starting to soften into the soil. We know that those trees will continue to bring life to the soil around them. Even though they are no longer living, they supply the forest with nutrients.

I'd never thought about this before, but I recently learned that the same thing happens when a tree falls into the water. When a tree falls into a river, a slow process of disintegration begins. The fallen tree becomes a log, and the log begins to lead a kind of afterlife in the river. This afterlife is, in some ways, of greater benefit to the river than was the original life of the tree. While a living tree provides shade on the river and shelter for animals, a tree that has snapped in two and fallen into the river creates a vast transfusion of nutrients - a river feast.\*

There is so much more happening under water than we can ever imagine, just as we know that the root systems of plants and vegetables are developing in complex ways in the soil even though we cannot see it.

Wherever there is life, it is emerging from someplace deep, someplace once hidden. Anything that grows begins in a place of depth. The child spends nine months in the womb, always hidden from light, at first perfectly hidden from sight, its presence not even known in its first days.

Paul loves the church in Corinth. Some of his most beautiful writings are in the two letters to the people there. He spent eighteen months there, nurturing this community, carefully tending them, teaching, preaching, leading. The people there were like small young plants which he gently placed in the soil, and watered and fertilized. He thinks they're on their way to growing and becoming productive without him, but almost as soon as he leaves, conflicts erupt. The garden is full of weeds. It's amazing how fast the weeds can grow, isn't it? So he writes them. Because he can't be there in person, he writes them letters of instruction and encouragement, trying to get them back on track. He pours out his soul to them, talking to them personally and deeply about what the Christian life means for him. "We have this treasure," Paul says, "in clay jars." The treasure is the good news, the gospel, the message of Christ, the presence of Christ, the assurance of eternal life. It is in clay jars, meaning people - ordinary people - are the ones who carry the message of the good news from one person to another. Be careful with it. You are carrying a treasure. It has the power to change and transform lives. Be careful that you tell the story in the right way.

And then Paul tells them, and us, in this very personal way, what the Christian life is like for him. It's not all rosy. It's not all glory. Not by a long shot. Paul lives with some sort of illness or challenge. He refers to it in several of his writings, but always obliquely. Scholars have debated this question for centuries. What did Paul struggle

with? Was it something that would have been impossible to treat in those days - perhaps a physical infirmity? Something like epilepsy? A mental illness? We don't know. But he mentions it enough that we know it was something that regularly caused him to feel challenged. And then there are times when he is imprisoned because of his Christian activities. His life was not easy. Here's how he puts it in today's passage: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." The difficulties are real, but they never have the final word. They do not define Paul. He always keeps them in perspective.

Paul tapped into a deep inner wisdom which taught him that the most difficult challenges in his life were not only survivable, but they led him to a deeper place, and in that deeper place he found strength and also joy. It seems paradoxical perhaps, but it is true for many people. It has been true in my life, that the times of greatest pain were, also, the times when I learned the most and found a sense of joy.

In The Book of Joy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the same experience, but from the opposite point of view. He starts with joy...here are his words: "Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that encourages rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken."

It's almost as if this is the way we were created, isn't it? To be uncomfortable with life that is lived always on the surface, in the shallow water. So we take a leap of

faith and dive into the deep end, knowing that what we will find there are the things that frighten us, the things we'd rather avoid, but also we find - sometimes to our surprise - that God is there, giving us strength and courage and yes, joy.

I talked to a church member a few days ago who is in counseling. I asked her how it's going, and she sighed a deep and long sigh. When it gets hard and when it gets uncomfortable, well, that's when the growth is just about to happen. Picture those fragile-looking flower stems that poke their way through the earth when it's still almost frozen and seems to be rock-hard. Yet they emerge, and with them the beauty of spring.

Can you recall a time when you and a spouse, or you and a good friend, or you and another relative had one of "those" conversations? The kind you dread. About money. Or intimacy. Or forgiveness. One of those hard conversations that you put off and put off and hope the topic will just go away. But you finally hash it out. You each speak. You each listen. And, in the best of times, the result is that you not only feel relieved, but you feel closer. That experience of going deep has also led to more joy in the relationship. The relationship feels more alive, more real, more fully human.

The writer and teacher Maya Angelou endured a horrific childhood which she went on to recount in her series of memoirs. Those books were therapeutic for her and for the millions who read them and who were inspired by her ability to tell her own truth and be vulnerable and share the pain of her life. She says that "all my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.' In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure."

There is an underlying promise of joy in our scripture passage for today, especially in these six words at the beginning of chapter 16. “So we do not lose heart.” Another version, perhaps more familiar says, “Therefore we do not lose heart.” No matter what. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Not death. Not cancer. Not divorce or bankruptcy or addiction. Not failure or success. Nothing. The love of God is our anchor in all of the chaos of life. And in God’s presence we find joy. There is nowhere we can go where God will not find us. In fact, God is already there. Even when we’re not sure we’re aware of it or believe it, God is there. So we do not lose heart.

The most challenging times in life are the times that define our character. They make us who we are. We approach them with faith and courage, knowing we are not alone. We would never choose them. We don’t enjoy them. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not sugarcoating the tragedies of life. Their pain is real and we would avoid it if we could. But we can’t. So we approach them with faith and courage, and we survive. And when we’re on the other side, we discover that we are stronger. We have developed fortitude. We faced defeats but we were not defeated. And the next time something happens, we are a little better prepared. We discover muscles we didn’t know we had. We are transformed and then we can help other people through what we now know how to endure.

The Dalai Lama says that there is a Tibetan saying which he believes to be true: “The suffering is what makes you appreciate the joy.”

Let me close by reminding you of a few what I will call myth-busters. I have mentioned these in sermons before, but these topics come up so often I feel a need to re-

peat myself. God does not cause us to suffer as a way to teach us a lesson. God doesn't cause suffering as a way of punishing us. God does not cause our suffering at all. That doesn't mean that we can't use our times of suffering as a way to learn and grow and eventually help others.

The man who wrote The Book of Joy, compiling the conversations between Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama, contributed a story of his own to the book. The year before he started this book project, his father fell down a flight of stairs and suffered a traumatic brain injury. The doctors explained that with a broken bone, they know exactly how long it takes to heal, but with the brain, they never know how it will heal and if it will heal completely. For more than a month he was in the hospital in varying states of delirium. His family didn't know if he would ever return to his former self, or even communicate again. He finally improved slightly and his son said to him, "I'm so sorry you've had this terrible experience." And the father spoke, saying, "Oh, no, not at all. It's all part of my curriculum."

Let us pray. Holy God, open us to the lessons that can be learned from life's deepest and most difficult moments. And thank you for your constant presence, bringing strength and joy. Amen.

\*Source: Feasting on the Word commentary