

“Why Are You Telling Me All This?”

1st Pres San Bernardino

Acts 10:44-48; Jn 15:9-17

5/17/09

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How do we recognize the presence of God?

What do you look for? How do you know?

I think that sometimes, like Peter and the disciples in this story from Acts, we are convinced that **the presence of God can most predictably be found among people just like us**, who believe what we believe, and think the way we do. We have pretty narrow expectations of where and how we think God will show up... and that has a lot to do with how often we recognize the presence of God.

But in spite of my expectations, I saw God at the National Orange Show last week.

And frankly, like Peter, **I was astounded at the way the Holy Spirit had been poured out on people very unlike me, people with whom I have some substantive *disagreements*, for goodness' sake!**

At the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, people from diverse faith and cultural communities were invited to read a poem or say a prayer or offer a song. As our mayor introduced each one, he spoke of something he appreciated about their presence in our city.

In introducing **the Cambodian Buddhist** monks, he noted that each year they give away hundreds of holiday turkeys to their neighbors. The person I was sitting with leaned over and said, “Aren't they vegetarians?” Of course they are. But evidently they know that their neighbors do not want tofu for thanksgiving. Now they are not teaching Christian faith, but they sure seem to be doing this ‘feed my sheep’ thing.

And then he introduced a leader of **the Latter Day Saints** church. Now I have some deep disagreements with Mormons about their theology, especially their thinking about women, and I view them as ‘taking care of their own’. But to my surprise, the Mayor said that last week a huge crew of their young people did cleanup in the north end of our city- and Tom and I saw them on our walk, and wondered aloud who was taking such good care of our neighborhood. And he said that *whenever* they need volunteers for any kind of civic project, the mayor's office calls them- and they deliver *every time!* I was touched and gladdened and humbled- here were these folks I distrust, serving my city and caring for me, in the name of their faith.

And then they introduced the pastor from **Victory Outreach**- Now, I am not comfortable with that way of being Christian, their emphasis on dramatic conversion experiences- but the Mayor said that day after day, in

drug court, when the judge looks at a defendant who has messed their life up horribly, and asks, “What are we going to do with you?” someone from Victory Outreach is in the room, and stands up and says, “your Honor, I will take responsibility for this person. I will help them make a new life.” What a witness. I am my brothers’ keeper.

And my heart was glad: here are brothers and sisters, working for good, making a difference every day... I was astounded. Though I didn’t expect it, the presence of grace was evident to me, and I was blessed by God’s astonishing generosity.

So I ask again: How do we recognize the presence of God?

I have a clue for you this morning, a very reliable and trustworthy clue. “**Joy**” Teilhard de Chardin says, “**is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.**”

I don’t think we usually think this.

I think we operate as if **right thinking** is the sign of the presence of God. We act as if **Duty and Responsibility** are reliable signs of the presence, or that **seriousness and solemnity** are the signs. But that’s not what Jesus says.

Jesus says, as he gives us the New Commandment on which we base our Christian life, “**These things I have spoken to you, that my joy might be in you, and your joy might be full.**” Not that you might be theologically correct, or that you might be dutiful or serious or have a long to-do list.

That my joy might be in you
That your joy might be full.

We are coming to the end of Eastertide, to the end of the season when we reflect on all the things the Risen Christ says to us,
And what he said *before* his suffering & death.....

Why has he been telling us all this? What is the point?

Joy is the point.

Not happiness, which is fleeting, but **JOY**.

Remember, this New Commandment was not given on a happy occasion. Usually when we read this text, the chancel is Maundy Thursday purple and about to fade to black, and we are remembering a last supper and betrayal and aloneness and death. Jesus was not *happy* on this occasion, as we are often not happy, because life is hard and pain is everywhere we look. **Still, he talks about joy.**

Let me contrast my understanding of Happiness and Joy-

Happiness is connected to circumstances: “How did it go?” “Did you get what you wanted?” “Did things turn out the way you hoped?”

Because these are the things that make us ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’.

But joy, joy is deeper than happiness.

If happiness is a sailboat, at the mercy of every wind and wave,

Joy is a submarine- existing far below the storms on the surface.

Joy is a gift from God, a gift that the storms of life cannot take from us.

I have seen people experience **joy in very unhappy circumstances**- the joy of making a difference, for example, in a painful situation.

The joy of a lifelong love that never ends, that makes **the farewell at the time of death** incredibly beautiful as well as incredibly sad.

Joy is the trustworthy marker. Joy is the point.

Joy is what we were made for.

I want you to pause for a moment and recall a moment of joy-

A moment when your heart was glad and you felt ‘full’ of thankfulness,

A moment when there was deep blessing and love, even if it was in the midst of difficulty or sorrow; even if it was brief.

When have you known joy? (*pause. Slow down.*)

- ❖ Perhaps you held a new baby,
- ❖ Maybe you stood in this room, in the midst of your spiritual family, and sang praise with your whole heart-
- ❖ Perhaps you’ve watched the sun come up and suffuse everything around you and within you with Light
- ❖ Maybe you made a promise that means more to you than life itself.
- ❖ Or you heard Pomp and Circumstance or Here Comes the Bride, and your heart swelled with tenderness and gratitude and hope.

Maybe all of those things... but pick one joyful moment to reflect on.

Recall it and then, in your imagination, remember it as clearly and distinctly as you are able. Take a minute or two to remember the details of what you saw and heard and felt and did. Return to that moment and let it bless you...

The most infallible sign of God’s presence is joy. In the experience you are remembering, *God was present*, blessing you, strengthening you, loving you.

Heaven knows there is darkness and sadness and pain in the world- but in spite of it all, God draws near to us, again and again, and we catch **a glimpse of how life is meant to be**, a glimpse of the joy for which we were created.

Frederick Buechner says, “Above all things we are loved...at the heart of darkness there is joy unimaginable... **Joy is home. God created us in joy and for joy. God’s joy is in our blood.**”

John Buchanan, at 4th Pres Chicago, says the wisdom of our faith is “...that you gain your life by losing it; that being a servant will make you happier than you ever have been; that finding someone, something to love passionately, **something important enough to live for and die for**, will in fact **produce joy**—God’s joy, the joy Jesus said was his too and that he wants to be full and complete in your heart and mine.”

Joy was Jesus’ hope for us. It is the infallible sign of his presence.

Are there signs of joy when we gather?? Would anyone visiting see this as a place where joy is sought and treasured and shared?? I think so. I think of all of you dancing last week to the Youth Sunday Energizer, I think of the week before when I inadvertently threw a pen across the chancel and several of you could not stop giggling for 10 minutes. There is, quite often, a freedom here, a welcoming of the Spirit, an openness to joy. And that is the point. Our joy is what Jesus died and rose for. **Let us be a people whose life together is marked by joy! Let us deepen the joy Christ has given us by sharing it.**

Let me close with a story. The last speaker at the breakfast was Danny Doueiri, a professor at Cal State, He is Muslim. His Lebanese parents came from two different faiths, his birth was overseen by a Protestant missionary doctor in Africa, His mentor was Armenian, he married a woman whose parents are Irish Christian and Dutch Christian- and on his story went. He had us laughing as well as thinking, and he concluded this way: “none of us, anymore, is shaped by just one culture, just one geography, just one religious tradition.. and so we belong to one another” **And as he came off the platform and returned to his table, he and Rabbi Emeritus Hillel Cohn embraced each other as if they were brothers-** which of course, in God’s estimation, they are,, and I felt my eyes fill with tears- **I was astounded-** For this is what I long for, on a larger scale, for my Church, and for my city and for my world. This welcome, this peace among unlikely persons, this evidence that God is still at work...**this joy.**

These things I have spoken...that my joy might be in you, your joy might be full. Amen.