



“Lifting the Veil: Living and Loving Without Labels”

Exodus 34:29–35 and 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Julie R. Harley – February 14, 2010 – First United Church of Oak Park

What brings you joy? When do you experience genuine joy?

Joy happens when God is present and people know it. Joy happens even in the middle of a recession, a war, an earthquake, a blizzard or an intensive care waiting room.

Joy has nothing to do with social status, age, race or income.

Joy happens when we are unguarded---when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable---when we let go of decorum---when we release our self-consciousness and embrace God-consciousness.

Joy happens when God is present and people know it.

Joy is a reflection of God's glory, God's light, and God's spark that takes residence in our souls.

Joy happens in the most surprising places.

I'll never forget the dances we used to have when I was a chaplain in a retirement community. They'd clear out the tables in the cafeteria, hire a three-piece band to play golden oldies, and turn the lights down low. The residents would hurry to their rooms after dinner and the men would pull out their suit jackets from the back of the closet, the women would haul out their best jewelry and any clothes that glittered. The punch bowl was filled, a disco ball hung from the ceiling and we got out on the floor.

Saturday Night Fever it was not. Many of the hips were not gyrating --- they were recovering from orthopedic surgery. Instead of gliding with a partner, most of the residents were (at best) doing donuts in their wheelchairs. There were very few

tattoos and piercings in that crowd – but a lot of white hair and glasses. Not exactly your typical nightclub scene.

But it was pretty darn joyful to see men with Alzheimer’s disease who could waltz like nobody’s business. It was pretty glorious to see octogenarians wearing Mardi Gras beads and flirting with the high school volunteers. It was grand to hear everyone singing along with “Mac the Knife.”

One man in his late 50s sat on the sidelines at the Valentine’s dance, a new resident who had recently gone through a double amputation and was adjusting to life in a wheelchair. He looked puzzled and a bit disgusted by the whole scene, saying, “This is nothing like the dances I’m used to.” He and his wife were about to leave early, when a few of us stopped him. “What’s holding you back?” we asked. “We know this isn’t like any dance you’ve been to before – but what’s the worst thing that could happen if you went out there tonight? Why not have some fun?” He thought about it. He turned his wheelchair around. And he and his wife went out on the dance floor.

Joy happens when God is present and people know it.

For me, the joy in that nursing home cafeteria was real. It was nothing like the manufactured glory of last Sunday’s Super Bowl halftime show. (Although the members of The Who are about ready for a nursing home themselves!) That, to me, was overly produced joy. There was nothing spontaneous about it – nothing genuine – nothing real. It felt like recycled joy, joy that was just trying too hard.

Why is it that our world has such a deficit of joy? Our glory tank is running on empty. Whatever genuine glimpses of God we get seem too few and far between. If God is present, we do not know it.

But when we gather in worship, it helps us to recognize joy. Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who spent much of his life in a monastery in Kentucky. One day Merton was walking in downtown Louisville, and he had an epiphany.

At the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm, now that I realize who we really are. If only everybody could understand this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of convincing people that they are walking around shining like the sun.

Moses knew a thing or two about shining like the sun. Moses had a surplus of glory. Our text from Exodus says he had just come down from Mt. Sinai after spending 40 days and 40 nights being with God. His face was shining with God’s reflected glory.

There was only one problem. People were afraid to go near him.

It was okay for Moses' face to shine when he was talking with God or when he was delivering God's message to the Israelites. Those were supposed to be holy moments. But for everyday things – when he had to go to the hardware store or shovel his driveway – Moses had to wear a veil.

He was just way too joyful for the world. We can't handle that much glory. It reminds me of the movie "Broadcast News." William Hurt plays a TV anchor who gets a great job and falls in love. He is talking with his less-fortunate co-worker Albert Brooks, and asks, "What do you do when your real life exceeds your dreams?" Albert replies, "Keep it to yourself."

We can only stand glory in limited doses: when we fall in love; when we attend a wedding; when a baby is born or adopted; when we get a new job; when someone wins an Olympic medal.

The rest of the time, we keep our glory under wraps. Maybe we're afraid of our joy because it makes us too vulnerable. Maybe we're afraid of God's glory because it so quickly fades from view.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, when the axis of the church year turns from God's light, shining in Christ, to the more somber season of Lent. This is a day to celebrate the peak experiences of life, those moments when we know in our bones that God is with us.

Today we heard a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Here Paul describes Moses and the veil he wore to hide God's glory.

Paul's theory is that Moses put on the veil because he didn't want the Israelites to see God's glory FADE. Paul has put his finger on the crux of our problem with joy and glory: it is fleeting; it doesn't last. After every mountaintop experience, we return again to the valley below, and life loses its luster. The glory fades.

In my office, I have three photos posted over my desk. One is a panoramic view of the Grand Tetons mountain range at sunset. Another is a picture of me and my daughters going whitewater rafting. And a third shows me at the finish line of a seven-mile race I ran with my nephew . . . in July. My face is definitely shining in that photo – not from glory, but from perspiration and relief!

Those pictures all represent peak experiences for me – moments when I felt God's glory in every cell of my body. . . moments when I felt fully alive and filled with joy.

I can't say I feel this way every day. Most of my days are spent at a computer, talking on the phone, solving problems, visiting people, or sitting in meetings. And

yet those pictures remind me that beneath the humdrum reality of my daily life is an undercurrent of joy and holiness. It waits for me to visit again. It appears in surprising ways, in unexpected moments.

Paul tells us, “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” With unveiled faces, we see the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror. We are transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

So what holds us back from being fully alive in every moment? One thing that prevents us from experiencing God’s glory is this little habit we have of putting labels on people. We hear them all the time, and we even use them ourselves. Labels like: Conservative, Liberal, Retard, Loser, Liar, Airhead, Jerk, Suck-up, Complainer, Cheapskate, Spendthrift, Blowhard, Player, Slut, Pain in the ***.

How often do we demean people with labels? How often do we drop a veil over their full personhood, by reducing them to a label? How often do we deny that they are fearfully and wonderfully made – created in the image of God, with a complex story, shaped by experiences we do not know or understand?

I’ve made a Lenten vow to give up labeling people. To seek to live with people and love people without calling them names. To resist the temptation to judge, label, categorize. I pledge to resist making my life simpler by putting people in a box – so that I can dismiss them.

How often do we do this, even to the people we love most dearly?

Paul says, “We do not lose heart.” When we turn to Jesus, we gain strength to live and love without labels. We are all works in progress. I think of the old saying, “Please be patient with me, God isn’t finished with me yet.”

Thanks to Facebook, I now know what happened to many of my former classmates – some of whom I have not seen or talked with for 20 or 30 years. Our lives have taken different paths.

One is a baggage handler with Frontier Airlines.

One is a physics professor at Stanford.

One friend is a jazz pianist.

One is the finance director for the Boy Scouts of America.

One friend is a fitness instructor.

One is a CEO.

One friend works for Caterpillar.

One is a regional director for Church World Service.

But those are all labels. When I think of them, I don't think about their jobs or where they live or what they do. What matters most is that when I think of them I see their smiling faces.

I think of the inner spark that drew me to each one of them. I think about what a gift their friendship was to me at some point in my life.

Thomas Merton said, "We were not made for pleasure; we were made for joy." We were made to live and love without labels.

This is your assignment. Look around the sanctuary today and lift the veils. See the face of each person here shining like the sun; shining with the glory of God. See their faces filled with love, a reflection of God's love. In this moment, be fully alive to the holiness of this gathered body of believers.

Joy happens when God is present and people know it. Amen.