

Foolish Joy

Psalm 14; Luke 15:1–10

Thursday marked 24 years after the attack on September 11, 2001. Novelist Colum McCann tells a story from that infamous day about his father-in-law, one of the ones who escaped the first tower. He then walked uptown to the apartment where his adult daughter lived with her family. He was covered in dust and ash. Entering the apartment, his young granddaughter ran to hug him but quickly recoiled, crying, “Granddaddy’s burning!” The adults assured her that she only smelled the smoke on his clothes. The child was adamant: “No, no, he’s burning from the inside out.”

America is burning from the inside out. The recent tragedies of gun violence, both political assassinations and school shootings, are flickers of flame from a burning core. I do not make this assertion to diminish the significance of any individual’s death; rather, I am concerned that the violence could flame into a roaring fire that consumes much more.

George Orwell wrote that, in times of crisis, our first duty is to restate the obvious. Murder is morally wrong, regardless of who the victim was. We grieve life lost, especially for the loved ones. This basic respect for human life is obvious. Adding fuel to the fire will not help.

Our second duty is to maintain that honest dialog is essential to a healthy society. The prophet Isaiah said, “Come, let us reason together.” I realize that many people feel passionate about issues that matter. But violence is not only immoral, it is shortsighted and ineffective. Violence will not achieve long term political goals—it will only hurt a movement over time. Nonviolence has a wider appeal and more capacity to build a large, diverse movement. It is also better at swaying public opinion. Our wisest knew this. Our most faithful knew it was the way of peace.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. learned the power of “tactical nonviolence” from Gandhi. King wrote, “I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through Gandhi’s method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people.” America is burning, and King knew that we could not fight fire with fire: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Reputable polls indicate that approximately 20 percent of Americans—10 percent of both liberals and conservatives—justify political violence against their

opponents. The Wall Street Journal reported that almost half of young people believe such violence is justified. Therefore, people of faith have work to do.

There's a story from Judaism that I find helpful. The Hebrews have fled Egypt and just crossed safely through the parted waters of the Red Sea. The Egyptians pursued them, but the walls of water collapsed and they drowned. At the death of the Egyptians, the angels in heaven burst into hallelujahs, but God silenced them: "How dare you rejoice! Are the Egyptians not my children?"

I turn that question to all of us who wish for honest dialogue to address the heart of the burning issues of our time.

I also turn to the parables that Jesus told because they describe rejoicing in heaven—a joy that actually pleases God. And what causes the angels to rejoice in both parables? Repentance.

In a free-word association with joy, I doubt that *repentance* is going to spring to mind. True, you likely have been taught that repentance is a good and holy thing. You might think of humbling yourself before a God who is not exactly subtle about pointing out your mistakes. You might have heard in Psalm 14 that "there is no one who does good—no, not one," and so, you recognize repentance is necessary.

But joy? Really? Isn't repentance about confessing sin and admitting that you are the source of someone's heartache rather than making excuses? That's not wrong. Rather than blaming other people, like one's political opponents, honest repentance would go a long way in our present situation, if not putting out the fire at the core of America, then at least not fanning the flames.

But in his parables, Jesus directly connected repentance with *joy*. Come, let us reason together: is this logical? You might even say that he's a fool—and you'd be right! Not the God-denying skeptic of Psalm 14, but in the manner in which the Apostle Paul claimed the Christian faith seems foolish but is the wisdom of God.

You might call it "foolishness" to leave 99 sheep in the wild to search for a single lost one. But while contemplating our current situation in our country, I'm wondering about the foolishness of the neighbors—the ones who rejoiced when they were told about the lost being found.

Consider the likelihood in our current society that, instead of celebration, neighbors would have been indifferent or judgmental. Some would question the shepherd's work ethic; others mock the woman's carelessness; some would wonder

about the shepherd's fitness for his job; still others would tell the woman that her stupid coin didn't have anything to do with them! "Put it on Nextdoor or something, but don't bother me!"

I can imagine these responses because I think many people in our society, Christians included, do not fully understand joy. We tend to think of it in terms of individual accomplishment. Joy is getting a job promotion or a new car. Joy is finally taking that dream vacation.

Along those lines, poet Ross Gay says that we think of joy as a room at the top of the crystal stairs, far away from our troubles and worries, with lovely natural light shining through big, bay windows on luxurious couches. This Joy Room is air-conditioned and has all your favorite foods and drinks. There are massage tables, too! In essence, it's a place of pure bliss, akin to heaven.

What if joy, at least on this planet in this life, were actually found not in some idealized place but in the nitty-gritty, rough-and-tumble of everyday life with its routines and sorrows? This joy could include people you know and love, as well as those who are different. That would mean that things will become messy, uncomfortable, and potentially confrontational. What if joy was working through those unpleasant, challenging feelings in order to build a new relationship? What if joy was doing such hard things together?

Holy humility! Doesn't that sound like repentance that leads to reconciliation? Do you think that's what Jesus was talking about in his parables? Did he actually believe that people could resolve their differences not merely to avoid violence but also to create joyful communion? What a fool.

When the angels celebrated the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, the Lord demanded, "How dare you rejoice?" And I wonder, in this burning time, as we pray for the courage, faith, and hope to be Christ-following fools, how dare we *not* rejoice? Joy, then, is a deep, involved sense of giving our attention, which leads to empathy, which results in solidarity. And solidarity then leads to more joy.

This "foolish joy" is the insistence that we are connected to others in the God in whom we live, move, and have our being. Perhaps the question is this: Do we dare to joy?

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