

Advent 3, 2012, at Brentwood

The True Source of Joy

**Luke 12:2-6 & Zephaniah 3:14-20
(122, 128, 133, 136)**

December 16, 2012

It is difficult this week to talk of joy,
especially in the wake of senseless slaughter in Connecticut.
20 children, 8 adults, including the shooter and his mother.

Where is God in all of this?
How can you possibly believe in a God of love after all of this?
Why would a God of love let something like this happen?

We human beings are a sense-making people.
That's how God made us.
Even in the face of what appear to be senseless slaughters,
and this is certainly not the first in human history,
we strive to find sense and meaning
in the wake of such tragedies.

Take the reflections of Jewish author Elie Wiesel
in the wake of the Holocaust, which he experienced and survived.
At one point in his writings,
in answer to his own question about where God was in the Holocaust,
he imagined that God was in the ovens with the victims,
on the gallows with the executed.
But he recognized that was not the final answer.
While human beings are full of questions,
the answers come from God alone,
and they might very well be answers
that human beings don't like or don't understand.
In the end, our calling is to be in concerned community with others.

*This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century –
solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely,
the sick, and those in despair.
It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning
to a community in which all members will define themselves
not by their own identity but by that of others.*

*Only one enemy is worse than despair: indifference.
In every area of human creativity,
indifference is the enemy;
indifference of evil is worse than evil,
because it is also sterile.*

There is an instinct deep within all of us,
a longing sown by God in our creation,
that draws us into community,
that draws us into a concerned love for others
in relationship with ourselves and God.

Much in human experience,
even before birth as we now know,
encrusts and distorts that instinct, that longing,
leaving us feeling alone, abandoned, and anxious.
We become habituated to seeking for flourishing
in all the wrong places.

Thomas Keating,
a Cistercian monk who founded the Centering Prayer movement,
talks about the ways human beings pursue
false forms of happiness
in security and survival,
in esteem and affection,
in power and control.

All of these things are legitimate human needs and aspirations,
but seeking them outside of community with God and others,
seeking them in ways that are indifferent to God and others,
leads to diabolical consequences.

Evil breeds in the darkness of the conditions
of loneliness, abandonment, and anxiety.
And, as Weisel points out so powerfully,
we worsen things by our indifference.

Despair, you see, *is* a form of engagement.
We may feel helpless to do anything,
but we do feel for the victims.
We are connected, in community,
with those who have died
and with the survivors who are suffering.

And out of that engagement,
despairing as it is in the moment,

comes the possibility of hope and joy,
especially if we understand,
deep within the consciousness of our souls,
that we remain in community with God, others, and ourselves,
regardless of how we feel and think at any particular moment.

Indifference cuts us off.
Despair, in some mysterious but powerful way, connects us.

Ultimately, it is that sense of connection with God and others
that cuts through the loneliness, abandonment, and anxiety,
with the laser beam of hope and joy.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit,
reminding us of how redeemed humanity shows up in the world
by pointing us to the example of Jesus Christ,
we are drawn anew into the concerned community of the Holy Trinity,
together with and surrounded by all of God's precious, beloved children.

We are assured afresh of God's constant and steadfast love for us all.
From that assurance, then, arises active hope that overcomes despair.
And from that hope, then, arises joy in the possibility of loving.

Most of you know Cory Weeds,
who has coordinated Jazz Vespers with us over the past two years.
He'll be here again with the B3 Kings
for our Christmas Jazz Vespers on Saturday, Dec 22,
hopefully with Alana, Noah, and Kayley.
One of the children killed in Newtown
was the daughter of jazz saxophonist Jimmie Greene.
Until recently, he taught in the jazz program at the University of Manitoba.
He is respected and loved throughout the Canadian jazz community.
His daughter's name is Ana Marquez-Grenne.
She is 6 years old.

I want to end this sermon with the words Cory wrote this week on Facebook.
They capture powerfully how true joy can arise out of despair.

*I vow to never ever get frustrated, dark, angry
when Kayley gets up in the middle of the night,
whether its once, twice, or ten times.
I will go in, give her a hug or a cuddle, and try to get her back to sleep,
remaining calm, patient and loving.
Life can change in an instant
and I want to try to be thankful for every moment.*

*May these thoughts and urgings be used by the Holy Spirit
to form us all for witnessing to the mission of Jesus Christ.*

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church