

The Gift of Joy  
Psalm 16:5-11  
July 15, 2018  
The Rev. Bob Griggs

This morning I want to think with you about pleasure, happiness, and joy as part of the life of faith. My touchstone will be the last verse of Psalm 16 that Loy read for us. "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

For me pleasure is the first step toward joy. Joy is more lasting than pleasure and can have a deeper impact, but pleasure, as simple as it may be, can help bring us to joy. And the pleasure I'm thinking about is pretty simple.

I can go to Sebastian Joe's Ice Cream Parlor close to my house in St. Louis Park and buy a chocolate walnut ice cream cone. Their chocolate walnut ice cream has the perfect balance of smooth, crunchy, and sweet. The first bite is the taste of pure pleasure and so is the second and third, even the last little bit that drips on my hand tastes good. You know, if I move this service along and drive fast, I could be licking a chocolate walnut cone in an hour or so.

None of this may seem like a big deal, but I think of pleasure as life saving for me. Pleasure was my step in recovery from major depression and anxiety disorder for which I was hospitalized twice in 2005. I'll get back to pleasure in a couple of minutes, but first I want to provide a little context on why I'm talking about these hospitalizations.

When I have some kind of supply or interim position as I have here now, I always make it a point to talk at some point about my own experience living with mental illness. The first time I did that here was in 2007 when I served here for three months as a sabbatical supply pastor. This was a three months, time limited job and just what the doctor ordered, literally just what the doctor ordered. This was my second such job following my hospitalizations. I'll always be grateful to

this church for taking a chance on me at that time. It's another reason why I love First UCC.

That said I have several reasons to talk about my hospitalizations. Partly I do this to fight stigma and to show there's nothing to be ashamed of in talking about one's mental illness. And partly I do it for support to people in this congregation who are living with mental illness and also their loved ones. And partly I do it as a kind of show and tell. I have this story, and here I am standing up in the pulpit and talking about it. The point is that recovery is possible.

Pleasure enters the story my first morning on the psych unit. I woke up more than a little disoriented because of the medications and stumbled around getting myself presentable to go to breakfast. I remember looking for a key to lock my room, as if I were staying in a Holiday Inn Express, and then remembering where I was. In the dining room I picked up my tray, took off the plastic cover, and there it was: three strips of bacon. I took a bite, just the way I like it a little crispy, but not absurdly so. Now, bacon like cigarettes is banned at my house, so this was a forbidden pleasure I hadn't had for a long time. I'm not saying it was as good as Sebastian Joe's chocolate walnut ice cream, but close enough. In fact it was the first thing that had given me pleasure in a very long time. I say now that my recovery began with the bacon.

If there's bacon today, maybe there will be bacon tomorrow. At least I hope so. And once you start to hope, even if it's only about tomorrow's breakfast, your recovery is making progress. In my experience recovery from mental illness is a long road, and you never really get to the end of it, which doesn't mean that things can't be much better than they were before. And for me this road of recovery started with pleasure.

Because pleasure has this kind of special meaning for me, I'm drawn to scriptures like Psalm 16, which celebrate pleasure. As I've said in previous sermons here over the years, the 150 psalms are about a lot of things and capture pretty much the full range of human emotion from love to hate, joy to sorrow, and pleasure to suffering. Indeed in my recovery I was first drawn to the psalms of suffering. There are psalms called laments that talk about the worst times in

life – loss, hopelessness, despair. They don't back off from the truth about how bad life can be. I found that they put into words what I felt like in the depths of depression.

But one need not stay in that place. And just because they are so honest about suffering, I can trust the psalms when they talk about hope, joy, and pleasure. Psalm 30 offers a kind of transition from suffering to joy. Here are a couple of lines from this psalm, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. . . You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." Isn't that about perfect? I'll read it again so you can savor it. (Reread.)

In the New Testament, joy is essential to the telling of the gospel story. The angels greet the birth of Jesus as "good news of great joy for all the people." We echo them when we sing "Joy to the World" on Christmas Eve. And of course the gospel story culminates in Easter, when we once again sing hymns of joy, with verses like "raise your joys and triumphs high. Sing glad heavens and earth reply."

Of course the gospel story does not just move from joy to joy. Before Easter there is the suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane followed by the anguish of the cross. Like the psalms, the gospel is honest about how awful life can be sometimes. But also like the psalms, there is the hope that life does not have to stay that way. At the center of our faith is this great hope that by the grace of God one can move from sorrow to joy. On Easter the tomb is empty symbolizing that joy and not sorrow is at the heart of things.

A couple of months ago, Sue and I went to a men's gospel concert at an African Methodist Episcopal church in St. Paul. There were seven different men's groups. Though that's not quite true, as one of the men's groups had a woman in it. At the break the group's leader explained, "I read the constitution of our church and nothing says that a men's gospel singing group can't have a women in it. Besides she sings better than all the rest of us put together." Sounds like wisdom to me.

The singing was wonderful, and the church was soon filled with joy. Whatever hardships these men had known or losses they had faced, whatever racism they had had to deal with in their lives – they were able for this time of singing to put it all a side and fill the sanctuary with the joy of their voices and of their faith. I don't know how it works, but there's something about the experience of joy that not only gives hope for the future but also provides healing for the past. It allows you to let go of things and to find peace.

There was a kind of mc at the concert, who provided a theological bridge or commentary as one group left the stage and the next got ready to sing. He talked about the singing as being a blessing, and then he said that a blessing has a splash about it. Now this idea of a blessing having a splash was a new one for me. He went on to explain that by splash he meant that when you receive a blessing you can't keep it to yourself, it naturally impacts or splashes on those around you.

I love this idea of splash and think it's totally true when we think of the blessing of joy. It's hard, maybe impossible, to keep joy to yourself. Besides, who would want to do that? I felt that with my bacon story. Eating the bacon was a solitary pleasure, and I had no intention of sharing, but telling the story and what it meant to me was a joy, and I hope the joy splashed on you a bit.

I think it's telling that when we think about Christmas and Easter hymns come to mind. When we sing the hymns, we have a chance to splash a little joy on each other. Underneath this is the very nature of joy that simply won't be contained but pushes us to share it with others. It's hard to be selfish when you're full of joy. You just have to splash it on somebody.

Amen.