



LUKENOTES

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Joy Requires Tending

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At this time of uncertainty, possible war, economic instability, sexual violence and scandals in our institutions, including in our Church, it is not surprising that we experience ourselves as more fearful, less hope-filled and perhaps even wondering where God is in all of this. Is it possible for us to experience joy, for Jesus' dream of complete joy (Jn.15:11) to be a reality for us even now? Perhaps now more than ever we are called to understand more fully Jesus' dream of joy for us; our human path does not have to be such a grim affair. It is also an opportune time to explore what it will take to live authentically and practically in hope and joy.

Joy is frequently defined as the positive emotion resulting from well-being, success, good fortune or possessing what one desires. Given our current world circumstances, joy thus defined, would be considered unattainable by many. From a psycho-spiritual perspective, joy comes from a deeper place within us and can best be understood as what results from a series of conscious choices on our part. Joy does not depend on specific outward circumstances, or on situations being a certain way, nor on the presence or behavior of a particular person. Joy, a gift available at each moment of our lives, does, however, require tending.

Some Threads That Bring Joy

To live in joy is fundamentally to live in the present. This is quite difficult for many because it goes against our tendencies and habits, as many of us have learned to search for our happiness in a remembered past or in a longed for future. It is, however, impossible to experience joy in anything other than the present. In each present moment, in the good times and in the difficult ones, we have the opportunity to experience joy. The choice is available to us each day. If we expect the worse, we will get it. If we trust the flow of life and trust in the goodness of our God, we will expect the best and more likely experience joy.

Surrendering to what is, accepting our circumstances, feelings, problems, work, and relationships is critical to joy-filled living in the present. Acceptance does not mean resignation: "that there is nothing I can do." Acceptance allows us to relax and to be able to see better the next steps. When we "say a holy yes to the real things in our life as they exist" (Natalie Goldberg), then our energy is not expended resisting what is and we are more capable of seeing and experiencing joy.

We practice gratitude when we notice and appreciate each day's gifts. This does not mean that we deny the painful realities of life: illness, financial difficulties, strained relationships or work that is not meaningful. Rather, it means taking time to notice what is, not just what is

not. Practicing gratitude means taking an active stance; it means choosing to notice what we are grateful for each day. Sarah Breathnach suggests keeping a gratitude journal in which we daily record five things for which we are grateful. She suggests that there will be some days with amazing things, some with simple joys and some tough days where we will have to go for the basics: a bed or a warm house. "Gratitude can turn what we have into enough and more" (Melody Beattie).

By fostering simplicity and order, we are better able to get back to basics and to learn what is really essential to authentic joy-filled living. The satisfaction that simplicity brings enables us to find reverence in everyday tasks. Paring down, ridding ourselves of excess, and knowing what goes where are all means for us to re-order our priorities and to discover what really matters. Doing and having will become less important in our quest for joy than being and being with.

Genuine communion with self, others and God helps us to look to healthy connections with others and God and our own inner resources for comfort and nurturance. These intimate connections will require time, energy, skills and a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. Through our human relating, especially through difficult times, we learn compassion and understanding love. The Gospel assures us that saving grace and love are continuously offered to each of us in the present, no matter how deficient our past. We need to be open, not give up, and not let the pain from early parts of our journey prevent us from going forward and experiencing the joy that comes from mutual, adult, intimate relating.

Finally, creating an authentic life for ourselves and enabling others to do the same is both a challenging, yet essential requisite for experiencing joy. Given our often unrealistic expectations of self and others, our attitudes toward and lack of real contact with our deepest desires, as well as our pace, this will be no small task. We will need to learn to listen anew, or perhaps for the first time, to the whispers of our hearts and not be afraid to explore what we genuinely love. Learning to pause, listen and consider needs and wants of ourselves and others, as well as balancing the expectations of ourselves and others will be absolutely essential for authentic living. Taking time to reflect on what is working and what is not will help us to liberate ourselves and do what will bring healing and growth into our lives.

Joy is a gift we have been promised, as predictable as a morning sunrise. However, because many of us have learned to be more proficient at weathering storms or getting through the winters of our lives, experiencing joy, enjoying the sun, summer and good times, may require both an act of faith and that we do our part so that "our joy may be complete."

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