

Joy Comes in the Morning
6 Epiphany B

“Weeping may spend the night; but joy comes in the morning” Psalm 30: 6.

One snowy night in Vermont, a large group of rowdy teenagers broke into an empty summer house near Middlebury College. In an orgy of drinking and partying, they trashed it. They broke a chair and threw it into the fireplace, discharged fire extinguishers, tossed beer cans, smashed china, and soiled the carpet with bodily fluids. The damage exceeded \$10,000.

Things got interesting after the teens were caught. Since the house had belonged to the great American poet Robert Frost, the kids were sentenced to ... poetry.

Yes, that’s right. Poetry. You could call it “poetic justice.”

According to *The New York Times* (June 8, 2008), the criminal justice system called on Jay Parini, a Robert Frost biographer and literature professor. He’d been writing a book called *Why Poetry Matters*, and this assignment challenged him to put his theory into practice. His job was to try to use poetry both to punish and to rehabilitate them. The teens had a spiritual awakening. Poetry does matter.

The book of psalms makes up a section of the Bible also called poetry. The psalmist in today’s reading gives us a “happy psalm.” The psalm has a good ending, though it is full of contrasts between the highs and lows we experience in life. One that is familiar: *“Weeping may spend the night; but joy comes in the morning”*. Each of the verses in the psalm we recited reminds us of God’s promised response: one moment the psalmist is feeling down and the other he is being raised up by God. The psalmist ends the psalm with singing and giving thanks to the Lord forever.

Such gratitude for God’s goodness is a means to an end. The end hoped for is that whatever may ‘rock’ our world we can always find one thing in which to be grateful to God. As discussed in Sermon Talk Back last Sunday, there are times when people in painful situations don’t feel like giving thanks to God. We should be sensitive to their pain when sharing our joy and gratitude to God for His goodness. The psalmist himself expressed that some trials caused him to wail only to find later that it was a means to an end – dancing for joy. Some trials turn out that way. Have you ever heard someone say that something they thought was bad at the time, turned out to be a blessing later? Other trials, like a chronic illness or handicap, have to be endured, may serve to build our character; or sometimes are a test of compassion and understanding on our part to those around us.

I find myself drawn to people who are grateful and living lives that celebrate the good rather than those with opposite attitudes. It is quite a thing to experience a community of grateful hearts and another to feel misery with those who just want to complain. I have received stories from many of you that are very uplifting. There was one recently on You-Tube, of a man without arms and legs talking to a high school assembly about life. He used his body to show them he was only limited by his own

fear or self pity. He forced his body into submission and was able to drag himself up again after he allowed himself to fall on his stomach. He refused to let his 'lot in life' get the best of him. Many of these students were in tears as they watched him succeed against the odds. The line to hug him and thank him afterwards went all the way out the door.

This man could see himself as inhuman without arms & legs. What might seem as a tragedy to some, he used instead, to bring joy into the lives of others. *Joy comes in the morning.*

The first lesson reminds us of another similar situation. Leprosy is one of those ancient diseases that before the discovery of medical treatment, just had to be endured. The story of Father Damien tells of his heroic efforts to bring compassionate and humane treatment for residents carrying Hansen's disease. This year, the Belgian missionary will be canonized by the Catholic Church for his work. Most of the historical research looking at this leper colony has been focused on people like Damien. Now the research has turned its attention to the 8,000 residents of Kalaupapa that formed a loving and cohesive community on a small peninsula on the island of Molokai. It is the story of men, women and children in exile, separated by state law from other family members until 1969. The story of their love and caring for one another is legendary. *Joy comes in the morning.*

God's goodness is not always apparent. Making sense of what purpose there may be in a hardship is sometimes not apparent either. Being asked to take action counter-intuitive to what may be a logical decision – this also makes no sense at times. Solomon in all his wisdom could make no sense of these things and he called preoccupation with such mysteries "folly."

For Naaman, the Aramean commander, it made no sense to him to bathe in foreign waters. Unless he could find relief, his leprosy would mandate that he must be separated. The command from the prophet Elisha to "Wash and be clean" seemed too simple, too easy. The faith of his servant brought him to action. *"Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning."*

Faith is the only means I can experience the fullness of His goodness. I must keep on trusting God and His people if I am to pass through the night of weeping into the day of rejoicing! I may have to force myself to keep believing that there is good, though I am not feeling it at a given moment. Perhaps this is what the apostle Paul was describing when he wrote, "So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air." Self discipline is not just for athletes. To 'exercise' our Gratitude to God produces more gratitude just as physical exercise builds muscle. That gratitude when freely given to God has the power to redeem and bring joy.

Jesus chose to make clean the leper in our gospel. God in His goodness made the man whole. I don't understand why this leper alone was cleansed and why this story was passed down. Perhaps it was to tell us we should keep asking God for faith to believe in Him. I note that it was the faith of the leper that caught Jesus' attention:

“If you choose, you can make me clean.” I don’t understand why Jesus sternly warned the leper to say nothing, knowing human nature as he did. The man was overcome by joy with gratitude to God. The leper helped Jesus do His work of spreading the goodness of God. Many thereafter sought out Jesus from every quarter. Perhaps those who sought Him out were willing to leave the ‘weeping of the night’ for the chance of finding joy.

We were made for joy! Do you believe it? I know I was made for joy. If I ever become used to weeping in the night instead of entering into the joy of the morning, than I pray God to cleanse me. If you ever hear me complaining about the darkness of this world, promise me you will pull me into the daylight or egg me on into the cleansing waters as Naaman’s servant did. May we help each other and all who are overcome by the trials of the ‘night’ to become children who look to the dawning of a new day. Amen.

Sources:

Editorial. “The best way out is through,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2008, www.nytimes.com.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/AroundTheWorld/story?id=6691302&page=1>.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqantZJ6WwM>. Are You Going to Finish Strong ?