

Abundant Life

by Rev. Durrell Watkins
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In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote, “To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable.” In other words, he would do anything other than change his attitude or his habits.

It’s true for us, too, isn’t it? We all want happiness, but we are sometimes reluctant to simply allow ourselves to be happy. We’re suspicious of happiness, and of those who try to help us embrace it. We have convinced ourselves that there is something holy, or noble, or courageous, or at least inevitable about unhappiness.

But you know what? I find it odd that Religion promises us joy in the next life. The promise is that in the next world, the righteous will enjoy unending happiness. This suggests to me that happiness is a natural goal. Heaven symbolizes the joy to which we are entitled. Once we believe that, I think it is a short step from believing we can have joy beyond this life to believing and even insisting that we can have joy IN this life.

Happiness isn’t just a carrot on a stick leading us to the afterlife. Happiness is possible here and now; it is our right, it is in our grasp, and difficult circumstances can’t rob us of it unless we allow them to.

There is a marvelous example of joy being available even when a situation is unpleasant. The example comes from Mark’s gospel and is repeated in Matthew’s. It’s the story of Jesus’ final moments. He’s suffering the pain, the indignity, the injustice of crucifixion. And in his moment of agony he cries out, “Eloi, eloi, lema sebachthani!” *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* (Mark 15.34; Matthew 27.46).

That moment is usually highlighted as a moment of doubt or unbearable sorrow, but I believe it suggests something far more hopeful, even joyful.

You see, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” is the first line of the 22nd Psalm. But that complaint is how the psalm begins, not how it ends. The psalmist acknowledges his pain, his disappointment, his regret, his fear that God has somehow forgotten him; but he does not stay there. He moves from that moment of self pity to remembering all that God has done and all the evidence that God’s love is always with him. Listen to how Psalm 22 ends:

24 For God has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one, did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out.

25 I will offer praise in the great assembly; my vows I will fulfill before those who revere God.

26 The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the LORD will offer praise...

27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before you,

28 for dominion belongs to the LORD who reigns over the nations.

29 All who sleep in the earth will bow low before God; all who have gone down into the dust will kneel in homage.

30 And I will live for the LORD; my descendants will serve you.

31 The generation to come will be told of the Eternal, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have brought.

The psalm begins, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” and it ends by saying, in effect, “Oh, that’s right, you haven’t. You never did. You never would. You never will.” Why did you abandon me? You didn’t. And so the psalm ends on a note of hope. Joy is restored, or at least the hope of joy is restored.

I don’t think it’s an accident that Mark and Matthew place the opening line of Psalm 22 on the lips of Jesus at his most difficult moment. They have Jesus singing a song that says, “Why have you abandoned me, God? Oh, yeah, you haven’t. The story’s not over. There is still reason to hope.” And that’s what Resurrection is all about. Resurrection doesn’t say that Golgotha doesn’t happen; Resurrection says that Golgotha doesn’t get the last word. And so even in a world where Golgotha can happen, we can choose to be happy; we can refuse to let Golgotha have the last word.

I believe in Good News. I honestly believe that religion at its best helps us live happier lives. And I believe we are meant to be happy. The prophet Nehemiah didn’t say that fear or melancholy or regret would give us strength. Nehemiah said, “The JOY of the Lord is my strength!” (8.10).

A familiar version of today’s gospel reading tells us “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10.10). The thieves Jesus refers to are religious authorities who use religion to instill fear and to rob joy. Jesus’ kind of spirituality offers hope, offers joy, offers the promise of an abundant life!

The Thief comes to kill joy, steal joy, destroy joy; but the way of Jesus is meant to offer a life of hope, wholeness, and happiness.

The psalmist declares, “Weeping may endure for a night, but JOY comes in the morning” (Psalm 30.5). Religion isn’t meant to reinforce fear, misery, or self-loathing. Religion is meant to help us navigate the night so that we get back to the joy of the morning. Happiness is the natural state. We’ll deviate from it, but then we come back together on Sundays and remind one another of the truth. When we talk about joy, we aren’t pushing fluff...This is the Good News. It’s not superficial, it’s not cheap; it’s just the honest hope for real happiness. And once we find the strength of our joy, we will be more generous, more courageous, more inclusive, more peace loving, more justice seeking...by accepting our own happiness we can heal the world.

The psalmist prayed, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23.5). God wants us to have cups full of joy, full to overflowing. And when we allow our cups to be full, the overflow is what we have to share with the world. We can teach what we don’t know and we can’t lead where we won’t go. And we can’t give what we don’t

have...by accepting our happiness we have happiness to share with the world. I believe that's a gift our world desperately needs. By committing to our own happiness, we are sharing happiness with the world. And that's no small gift; in fact, this is the good news. Amen.

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I embrace the fullness of life.
I allow myself to be happy.
I share my happiness with the world.
Joy now blesses my mind, body, and affairs.
The joy of the Lord is my strength.
Alleluia!
Amen.

The Dalai Lama says, "...everyone wants happiness...And happiness mainly comes from our own attitude rather than from external factors. If your own mental attitude is correct, even if you remain in a hostile atmosphere, you feel happy."