

The Table of Joy

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 7, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Isaiah 55:1-3](#) and [Luke 15:11-24](#)

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I said before that there are many kinds of exile. There are formal, political exiles where one is forced by an authority to leave one's home and community – even one's country – and live somewhere else. There are estrangements from parts or all of one's family that are a kind of exile. Feeling like an outsider can feel like being an exile. Feeling like things are falling apart or coming unglued can lead to a sense that one is now living in a strange land.

The verses we heard from the 55th chapter of Isaiah were written in a time of exile. In this case, it was the political exile of the Jews by Babylon. When the Babylonian conquered the kingdom of Judah, vast numbers of Jews, especially those with political, religious, or economic power, were forced to leave their homes and move to a foreign land. In the midst of this emotional and spiritual trauma, the prophet offers a word of hope and a vision of joy. "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and those that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Our current heat wave aside, the prophet is not reminding the people to stay hydrated. The message, of course, is emotionally wider and spiritually deeper than that. The prophet is reminding the people that God spreads a banquet and invites them to the table of plenty, to the table of joy. You don't need money to buy this food. It's priceless. Your money's no good here. Come, eat and drink.

While it's certainly not Isaiah's intention, I can't help but hear these words from a 21st century Christian context. I know that's not the 6th century BCE context in which they were written. Still, that's how I hear them. For me, God's banquet table is best seen in the communion table, and the food and drink here is priceless. You can't buy your way in. You can only accept God's gracious invitation and come, eat and drink.

That's how it is at God's table. This is a place of radical welcome. This is a place of authentic justice. This is a place of unconditional love. This is a place of unending grace. This is a place of abounding joy. And when God sees us coming, even when we're still far off, God kills the proverbial fatted calf to make it a joyous celebration. That's how glad God is to see us coming, and God invites us into that joy.

Wayne Dyer says that our natural state is joy. I wonder if this contention is part of the reason the creators of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* made the emotion Joy the primary emotion in Riley's brain. I suspect many of you saw the original *Inside Out*. But that was nine years ago, so I'll offer a little summary. *Inside Out* explores the emotional landscape of an 11-year-old (named Riley) as she deals with her family's move from Minnesota to San Francisco. Her emotions are personified as characters who work in headquarters guiding Riley. They are (from left to right) Fear, Disgust, Sadness (on the floor) Joy, and Anger. The movie shows Joy (and Riley) learning to accept the contribution Sadness brings to her/their



life. They learned that sadness can help us identify when we're overwhelmed and need support from others. Sometimes Joy needs to stand aside and let Sadness run the control panel.

In *Inside Out 2*, Riley has entered puberty and headquarters is expanded to make room for four new emotions: Embarrassment, Anxiety, Envy, and Ennui.

Welcoming and integrating big new emotions like these is part of the work of adolescence, so this is a great set-up for the movie. I don't want to spoil what happens in this sequel, so I'll only say that it is very well done. And I'll say that I think there could easily be lots more sequels: grown-ups have emotional work to do, too.

Dr. Jacquelyn Gill is a grown-up. She's also paleoecologist, a professor at the University of Maine, and a scholar I follow on social media because of my passion about the climate crisis. Her research into the ecologies of prehistoric periods helps other scientists better understand the impacts of climate change on current ecologies. A few weeks ago, she recognized some emotional work she had to do, and she announced in a social media post (I think as much to herself as the rest of the world), "I am leaning into joy as a radical act. I'm trying to hold on to what keeps me going by reconnecting with the people and places I love. It had gotten to the point where I had forgotten what I'm fighting for. Neglecting my joy was like inviting the thieves to carry out everything I own. I was participating in my own dismantling."¹

Her announcement got me thinking about where and how I might be in danger of burnout. I've been thinking about how much I let big emotions like sadness and anxiety and embarrassment and fear run the control panel in my headquarters. And I've been wondering how I might lean into joy myself as an act of self-care. You've probably heard of *schadenfreude* – the feeling delight and joy at someone else's misery.

Social scientist Dr. Brené Brown says, "All you have to do is go on social media or turn on the news.... [It's so easy to find times when someone] big fails publicly, or some influencer makes a wrong step."² We watch this stumble, think something like, "they deserved it," and feel joy at their pain. Brown points out that group *schadenfreude* is particularly insidious and unhealthy because "any time you feel connection [in the group] based on someone else's pain or humiliation that connection is counterfeit. It is BS. It's not real connection."³

There's a related form of joy that is almost the opposite of *schadenfreude*. I had not heard of until this week: *freudenfreude*. *Freudenfreude* is finding "pleasure or joy in

¹ Jacquelyn Gill, tweet thread on X.com, <https://x.com/JacquelynGill/status/1800248514901131465> (posted and accessed 10 June 2024).

² Brené Brown, interviewed by Ellen DeGeneres on *The Ellen Show*, segment posted on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/8PKMjBC56l4>, about two years ago and accessed 6 July 2024.

³ *Ibid.*

someone else's pleasure or joy."⁴ When a friend tells you they got a promotion at work and you experience joy at their joy, that's freudenfreude. Brown says of experiencing freudenfreude, "We know it's a huge predictor of good relationship and deep connection – with lovers, with friends, with family."⁵

In the face of all the heartbreak and pain and struggle and dangers in the world, we can feel like we're in exile. And when we feel like we're in exile, we may not allow ourselves to experience joy. We tell ourselves, "How dare I feel joy when the world's falling apart."⁶ And that's actually the last thing the world needs. Brown says, "The last thing the world needs is for us to withhold love and joy. We need to take action against all the systemic stuff that's happening in the world right now – there's no shortage of ways to do that – and we also need to lean in to love and joy and connection."⁷

So, here are the beginnings of my plan to lean into joy. First, I'm going to remember God's joy in welcoming us at the table of joy and see if I can experience some freudenfreude there. Second, I'm going to embrace freudenfreude during my vacation that's coming up. I plan to delight in the delight of choruses at the choral festival I'll be attending. I plan – actually, I'm already enjoying the joy my father's experiencing as he plans for my time with him. And beyond that, I plan to notice the joy around me and let it spark joy in me. Amen.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*