

Finding Joy Once Again

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I remember it like it was yesterday. It was November 22, 1991, just two days before Thanksgiving. I was looking forward to the flight home and getting a warm greeting from my dad at the airport. I was in college at the time and a resident SLD (Spiritual Life Director) for my dorm. (The term sounds more like I'm a lifeguard on duty, doesn't it?). Nevertheless, I was responsible for overseeing the spiritual milieu of my dorm, which housed over 60 plus young men.

A week prior, my resident assistant (RA) approached me and asked if I would be willing to share something at our next hall meeting. I said I would be honored. Being that the holiday was just a few days away, it seemed most appropriate to share something on the notion of being thankful. However, I feared sharing something that would basically consist of the same message you and I were raised on – a discussion on Thanksgiving. I didn't want my brief thought to fall on deaf ears because I hadn't put any thought into it. Thus, the challenge for me would be to reflect on something that was relative and fresh.

One of my favorite passages in scriptures was and still is James 1:2-4. *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* For some reason I felt impressed to share this with my hall mates but, before I did, I had two questions to open the meeting with. The first obvious one was, "What are you thankful for?" This open-ended question was intended to elicit feedback. Many shared some of the typical answers we've heard over the years; others shared very personal remarks. We didn't stay too long on the

question and quickly moved to the second one, since this was to be the main focus. I knew this would be a challenge for me and them, but my objective was to cause all of us to think hard on this idea. I asked them, "Have you ever thanked God for the difficult times in your life?" The objective with this question didn't anticipate a response. In fact, the hall quickly became silent. Not that my question was original, but it was the first time I had asked myself that particular question.

Without trying to defend the question, I simply read the passage. I find it interesting that the passage does not ask us to consider or suggest that we have certain emotions; it commands us to have joy. That's right. The passage specifically challenges us to have pure joy when we face very difficult circumstances *of many kinds*, and that includes the worst things you and I have faced before. After closing the devotion, I went back to my room and prepared for my trip to NY the following day. Little did I know that my devotion was intended for me.

As was the case with every family Thanksgiving, this one was just as special. Mom and Dad prepared a feast of sorts. The night before Thanksgiving, Mom and Dad prepared the turkey. And then, very early on Thanksgiving morning, Dad placed the turkey in the oven on a very low temperature, a family secret to cooking the turkey (pss...don't tell anyone you heard that from me.) The rest of the day entailed mom and dad cooking a variety of things. My brothers and I chopped a ton of firewood (or something close to it) for the entire winter season, and later on made our famous family eggnog. The day was filled with excitement. Christmas music could be heard throughout the entire house and, if you listened carefully (assuming you were present), you might have heard my dad humming or singing holiday songs. The scent of homemade food made our appetites increase by the hour. While many men spend their Thanksgiving

afternoons watching the tradition NFL game in Detroit, we never had the TV on. Our time was spent interacting with each other, whether it was outside in the cold air, or inside around the butcher block helping our parents with the dinner preparations. As always, mom and dad did everything they could to make our Thanksgivings extra special, and they were the best.

The Sunday following Thanksgiving, Dad woke up early to get fresh bagels and rolls, pastries and donuts, bacon and eggs, coffee and juice, and an assortment of items which was hallmark to his generous love. He was a giver in every sense of the word. He prepared the entire breakfast. He then visited each of our rooms, inviting us downstairs for breakfast. When we awoke, it was to the smell of bacon and eggs. Mom decided to go ahead to Sunday school and we agreed to meet-up with her for the main service.

It was during our breakfast that we received a phone call which made this Thanksgiving a memorable one. My dad picked up the phone and listened to the other person on the line. My brothers and I immediately knew something was wrong and that mom was the source of concern. The only thing I heard my father say was, "what hospital is she at?" and "we're on our way."

My dad shared with the three of us that mom was in a bad car accident but that she was ok. We felt relieved to some degree but still quite concerned about her condition. On our way to the hospital, we passed her car which was clearly totaled. When we arrived at the hospital (about 35 minutes from our home), dad and I went into the emergency room while my two brothers stayed in the waiting room. As I entered my mom's room, surprisingly she looked very good. She was clearly banged-up, but her spirits were positive and she didn't appear to be in any severe discomfort. However, in just a few moments, I was going to find out that mom wasn't alright. She asked my father

to place a pillar under her legs and, when he lifted them, we knew her status was worse than we thought. I never heard my mom scream in such pain as I did that day. At the sound of her cry, I had to remove myself from the room because I knew something was terribly wrong. I met my brothers in the waiting room and they knew I was a little scared. We sat there waiting, which seemed like an endless amount of time.

At one point, I noticed through the window a police officer pull up and walk right into the ER room. He was going to see my mother (which I didn't know at the time). After he left, my father came out to us. He was clearly moved by something because his eyes were filled with tears, not a common behavior for my father. So I knew it was something important. He shared that the officer came to the hospital because he was amazed that my mother was still alive. Normally, officers don't go to hospitals after a person has been taken from the scene of an accident yet, for some strange reason, he felt compelled to come and share his own astonishment, and that he never saw someone survive such a horrific accident.

If that wasn't enough, we would soon find out that the left side of mom's body was crushed. Her bones were splintered in so many areas that it was simply impossible to reset everything. So we didn't know mom's overall prognosis. All we knew was that her life and ours would change dramatically. For mom, the things she was once accustomed to doing - from running, swimming, traveling, cooking, raising her boys, and all the day-to-day things we took for granted - would never be as they once were.

I decided to delay my flight back to college because I didn't have a peace about mom's overall condition. On Monday morning, the doctors told us that they would have to perform some very invasive procedures if she was ever going to walk again. They did

assure us that she was going to be ok, at least that there was no risk of her dying, but that didn't abate the concerns I had.

My parents suggested that I return to college because there was nothing I could do. So, with reluctance, I flew back later that day. At 9 p.m., everything came to a head back in my dorm room. I pulled my chair toward my desk and then paused. For the first time, I was able to stop and grasp the extent of what transpired a day earlier. I finally came to the realization that my mother was almost killed. It was a staggering thought. Finally, I pulled my chair back, leaned forward, and placed both hands over my face. Tears streamed down my face, literally like a river. I sat there for at least an hour emoting all that I felt inside of me. Sitting there, emotionally drained, I thought about my mom and how much I loved her. I took into account all the years she sacrificed so I could be where I was. I thought about the countless times she sat by my side while I laid in a hospital bed. I thought about the hours of research she took to find the best schools for each of her sons. Most of all, I remembered the endless amount of love she gave to me. And now, within a moment of time, she was almost taken from us.

On top of that, I was confronted with my own selfishness. I noticed how I took for granted what I was given. Yet, I never had a full appreciation because I didn't have the maturity or the understanding to appreciate what a blessing my mother was. Because I was exposed to my parent's selfless love my entire life, I had nothing else to compare it to. But, now that almost changed and I was just beginning to see how gracious God was to me all those years.

As I was being confronted with my own shortcomings, it finally dawned on me - the message I gave at the hall meeting last Tuesday. Immediately, I sensed God asking me the same question I posed to the men on my hall. Could I thank Him for allowing my

mom's accident? (Note: I didn't use the word "cause" because I didn't feel he did. In God's sovereignty, I believe he allowed this event to happen.) Could I express this joy that I'm called to have? I didn't want to put on some smiley face and act as if everything was fine. Yet, here I was just a few yards from the hall I stood in, challenging men with something I was least ready to embrace myself. I knew I couldn't answer the question at that moment, but, if there was something gained from that confrontation, it was God challenging me to think about this question: "Could I, Justin Agoglia, be thankful, even for the worst of circumstances?"

I have to be honest, it's still not easy for me to express joy over tough experiences, but I do believe I am starting to understand more about this joy God desires us to have. It's a joy that is far greater than the temporary joys you and I have come to understand. It's not a humorous joke, a comedic comment, or a sitcom that makes us laugh temporarily. It's an attitude we embrace and carry with us. In spite of our difficult circumstances, God is - in some profound, mysterious way - still in control of our fracture lives. Our joys are not birthed from external situations; it's an inside job that only God can orchestrate. It's a process we go through, allowing us to be people of substance, who genuinely feel and care for others, who act out of compassion, and touches real lives with real needs.

In my opinion, the experience we had with my mom in 1991 was readying us for what was ahead in 2003. Perhaps God was preparing me and my family for the pending loss of my dad just 12 years earlier. Do I wish he chose another method of preparation? Of course I do. But, then again, I'm not God. Being the master Creator of humans, I have to believe he knows the best way for us to truly learn something, things we could never learn through traditional methods of learning. If it was an issue of better

knowledge, then our educational institutions would be sufficient. However, God's idea of learning is different than our Western model of education (for those of us in America). It isn't something we can fully grasp with our minds. It's something that has to be burned into our entire personhood and, often, it takes a crisis or some powerful experience for us to learn something of such importance.

I don't feel things occur by happenstance. In my faith, God is involved in every detail of our lives. I think it's wonderful to find characters in scripture who questioned the active presence of God in their lives. They wondered, expressed anger and frustration, and some even wished their own demise would come sooner. Yet, we see that in spite of their doubts, God was active and doing something during their period of silence. As you and I question God's role in our lives, we must at some point understand that he is God, and we're not. Without me trying to defend God (something God has not asked us to do), we read in scripture God's response to our questions. In Isaiah 55:8-9 it says, "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*" says the Lord. *'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'*" In response to us trying to bring God down to our human level of experience, God responds with this thought, "*You thought that I was altogether like you; But I will rebuke you....*" (end of Psalm 50:16-21)

Just as you might have a certain way of approaching a project, I may perform the same task an entirely different way. If that's the case, then why is it so difficult for us to accept God's method of developing each of us? I believe the answer lies at the place where real growth occurs. Think for a moment: whatever extent of schooling you had, do you remember every little nuance of information? Of course not. I barely remember much of what I learned. But if I asked you to recall something you learned which profoundly

changed you, you always find a person attached to your learning. Someone took the time to reach out to you, to listen you, and encourage you to see beyond what you could see. They valued you and you felt valued. But where were you touched the most – your head or your heart? You were profoundly changed at the core of your heart.

If we are really going to change, it has to be done at the heart level. Of course our minds are important to our learning and understanding, but it's limited. Learning real, life issues - where wisdom is extracted and gained for a lifetime - happens at the heart level. And because heart issues are so central to who we are, when someone touches or manipulates those parts of us which are tender, we react and buck at the thought of someone "violating" those core areas.

So what does this have to do with having joy during difficult trials? A lot! I don't believe the James passage is advocating that we should be happy when bad things happen. It doesn't mean wearing a facade on our face as if nothing is wrong. This is not a mandate for denial. On the contrary, it's a call to be real and honest with ourselves. It's a challenge to embrace our heartaches and our losses. Our lives aren't simple. If anything, they're more complex. Everyday we see sadness all around us, but, unfortunately, many of us walk around as if our lives are perfect. Perfect? Yes. When someone asks you, "how are you doing?," most of us respond by saying, "fine" or "great." Who are we kidding? We all have emotional "luggage" that we wish was left at customs. But it's not that we have "stuff" to deal with that makes us sick. It's the fact that we fail to accept the existence our pains that prevents us from moving forward in life. It is very much a paradox, but that's what makes it so profound.

Let me put it this way. At the time of this writing, almost two and a half years have passed since my father passed on. And during this time, it hasn't been an easy road.

From the moment my father passed, I was certain of one thing – I wanted to go through this healing process as best as I could. I didn't want to attach anything to my life which would inhibit my ability to grow and become what God has for my life. Surprisingly, I've had some tell me how I should grieve and for how long it should take. And even when I shared that I needed space and time to work through tough issues, I was often misunderstood. Some wrote me off; some even abandoned the friendship I once treasured. On some level, I wish things were different, but then again, I never wanted relationships which prevented me from walking through this process. And if some chose to leave the friendship for whatever reasons, that's fine. If anything, this process has revealed who my true friends are and who they aren't. I'm at a point in my life where I want authentic relationships. All throughout my collegiate education, I've met wonderful individuals along the way. Most were acquaintances and played a part in my life for a season. But there have only been a few who I would consider deep, genuine friends. These are individuals, who through the best of times and through the worst, have been there with me. And I would like to believe that I've been there for some also.

With that said, life is difficult. It's not the white picket fence we all came to believe in school, heard from our families, or watched in the movies. Life is filled with ebb and flows. If you've lost your spouse, you feel loneliness in a new way. It's false to believe that our relationships remove all semblances of loneliness; they don't. But our relationships are valuable. Companionship is a wonderful gift God gives us. But now, living without your spouse makes you feel that loneliness even more. For the son or daughter, like myself, who is forced to live your future without your parent(s), you wonder how can you. You may have even questioned at times if it's even worth living. I have.

Since I'm in the process, I can only respond with what I've learned thus far. If I can offer something, it is through my writings which I've tried to be as honest as I can. I've tried to stay away from stupid, heartless expressions. No one wants that. As I see it, the only thing I can truly offer you is my own brokenness. On this level, we share a common experience. Together, we can encourage one another, giving hope to those who share the same struggles. Although we may feel alone, we're not. Many share our predicament. Many want a voice who will speak forth what they feel within. They want someone who understands them. Many just want an ear who will listen to their cries, even if they share the same thing over and over. Some need a warm hand who will gently squeeze theirs, not pat them on the shoulder as if to say, "hang in there." Some want a hug because they need to be held. Some need eyes who will weep tears because they understand the very pain you feel. Some of you need people who will be the feet for you, who will visit you and walk with you side by side. There's something about being with others who truly care about you. Lastly, all of us need someone who will be that heart – the heart which beats compassion, sensitivity and understanding. But, at the same time, it's the heart which expresses joy that once seemed forgotten or lost.

As shared earlier, I'm beginning to understand this joy God commands me to have. For whatever reasons, whether it be maturity, age, timing, or a combination of the three, God is birthing a new joy in me which he desires for all of us. In a day when things come fast (i.e. food, information, material possessions, etc.), God's values are far different than ours. His understanding of what it takes to create people of deep compassion, unconditional love, and an unending joy is different than our process. Therefore, as I see it, learning about the joy God understands will never be fully appreciated until we're with him in eternity. My limited understanding of joy is just

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touching the surface. But from whatever vantage point I have, I can see why our future will be amazing.

Principle: It is not until we embrace our pains first, that we can experience joy once again. But we must realize that our joy is not a returning to what we once knew and understood; it's a new joy - one that is richer, enduring, and most of all eternal.