

Today's Gaudete Sunday, and for the record, this color is 'rose,' the color of rejoicing, not 'pink' the color of something else entirely. "Gaudete" is a Latin word that means "rejoice." We take a break from the season's penitential perspective and instead focus on the joy that lies at the heart of our hope of salvation. The point is to remind us that in the midst of all the heaviness we can experience in life, the losses and tragedies that afflict us and the general darkness that seems at times to envelop the world, there's cause for joy because of our hope in the promises of Jesus Christ.

In everyday speech, joy and happiness are frequently used synonymously, but I'd like to suggest to you that even though there's some overlap at the emotional level, there's actually a significant difference. Happiness can be a mile wide and an inch deep sometimes. Joy, though, goes down to the bone, and beyond. It's much more than just an emotion or simple Christmas card sentiment. Joy "animates our lives and ultimately leads to a life of satisfaction and meaning."¹

Happiness generally reflects pleasure, but joy comes from grasping that our deepest needs and hopes are being met; it's unmistakable confirmation of our deepest worth. Anything from finding a parking space to the UConn men winning can bring us happiness, but joy comes to us in direct, exquisite encounters with the love of Jesus Christ, frequently as God comes to us disguised as other people. Happiness comes and goes, and might even accompany joy for a bit. But true joy doesn't need the glee that goes along with happiness, and it lasts forever. Let me tell you a couple of stories and you can decide if you agree.

If you watched any of President Bush's funeral, you might have gotten a glimpse of how joy can emerge even in the unhappiest of moments. At one point during his eulogy, George W. said of his dad "As he aged, he taught us how to grow old with dignity, humour, and kindness — and, when the Good Lord finally called, how to meet Him with courage and with joy in

¹ Desmond Tut & the Dalai Lama, *The Book of Joy*, p.3

the promise of what lies ahead.”² For those who take Jesus Christ seriously it would seem that even the sadness of death and separation doesn’t eclipse the joy our faith promises. The good news of love never grows old.

Such an observation doesn’t require anyone to die, either. Several years ago, while I was visiting patients over at Hartford Hospital, I encountered an older man and his wife waiting for the discharge staff to come and clear him for departure. They were obviously happy to be going home together and I asked about that. They told me that they’d been married for 68 years. I told them they’d been married longer than I’d been alive.

We laughed together and then they told me their story. High school sweethearts, he’d spent time in the Navy, rather like President Bush, while she had worked and carefully built up a nest egg for them. They married shortly after his discharge and together raised a large, happy, loving family. I asked what it felt like to have been married for 68 years and the husband said “Well, like everyone else I guess, we’ve had our ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies.”

He paused for a moment and exchanged glances with his wife. Wordlessly, I could see them reading the story of their lives in each other’s gaze. “We might not always have been what people nowadays would call ‘happy’,” he said, “but there was never a moment without joy; when you both have what your hearts most desire, you feel known, completely welcome, loved, safe and strong.”

Pausing to hug his wife, he asked me if I was a theist and I said, yes, I believed in God. Then he told me “What we wanted most was each other, and we got that. What surprised us after we’d been married for a while was that we actually wanted more; we both wanted to love and be loved as God loves us. In loving each other we found that God was the real source and

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/george-hw-bush-state-funeral-text-of-george-w-bushs-eulogy/article25675279.ece>, December 6, 2018

object of our deepest love, our deepest joy. Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he referred to himself as 'The Way'." I left the room in awe, dazzled by love like that. Our Church teaches that to be saved is to enter into the joyful love of the Holy Trinity itself. To me, it seemed that these two lovely people already had one foot in that door.

Last story: A few of us VFW sorts were chatting over lunch one day about which military YouTube videos had stuck with us. I told them that one of my favorites was about a young Marine back from deployment in Afghanistan. His wife had arranged for him to surprise their two youngsters at school upon his return.

The clip had shown the children's reaction to seeing their dad. You can't watch any of these kinds of clips without getting a lump in your throat. The one thing the children had been hoping for, the one thing they wanted more than anything else was to have their dad back, and there he was. For real. Right in front of them. It could so easily have been otherwise, but it wasn't.

I've never seen people hug one another as tightly as those two little people clung to their dad and he gripped them with that big bear hug men give to those they love. They all laughed and cried without restraint. "We were beyond happy," the Marine had said later, surrounded by his wife and children, "I don't know what the word is to describe a moment like that, and the moment hasn't really stopped. Somehow, it's for keeps. I wonder if Heaven's like this?"

That's joy. The elderly couple at the hospital know all about it, and George W. recognized it at his father's passing. Is it Heaven? Maybe they all just had one foot in the door, but it's like that with the promised salvation we anticipate during Advent. Maybe life could be otherwise, but it's not. Enter deeply into the Eucharist now and see for yourself - joy and the love of God are real, right in front of us, right now and for keeps, just quietly awaiting your embrace and mine.