

With Shouts of Joy

MARJORY ZOET BANKSON

THEIR song soared and fell, spreading into harmonies that made my heart grow wide. We clapped and swayed as their voices filled the tent at the Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. They sang us into the very presence of God. I gave myself gladly to the call and response verses, sharing the joy of their drama and cadence. We felt the "balm in Gilead" as God's people together.

As I stood listening to the gospel music, feeling bone and body respond, I heard the relationship between suffering and joy. Surely Israel's covenant relationship with God was shaped by pain and deliverance into the jubilant expressions of joy that course through the psalms: *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy* (Ps 126:5).

As the concert ended and the crowd began to disperse, I felt deep gratitude for their faith and witness in this secular setting. It was clear that many listeners had been moved. My feeling of fulfillment was very different from the emptiness which often comes with accomplishment or special effort. A reward does not necessarily bring joy. **The cost of middle-class comfort can be a certain smugness that turns us toward entertainment and self-indulgence, away from awareness of our dependence on God for life itself.** Our children, sitting amid the strewn paper of a lavish Christmas, will say "Is that all?" A special vacation or cherished goal can leave us flat and unsatisfied. Joy is something else.

A guide for me has been Michael Curry, an Episcopal priest in Baltimore's inner city, who speaks of the difference between the joy of living into God's dream of restoration and our nation's nightmare of separateness and consumerism. He says the biblical vision of peace and justice provides the basis for true joy out of gratitude. "Why didn't slaves go crazy?" Curry asks, "They had no doctors, no therapists or social workers. Even families were separated and sold. I believe it was their singing. Spirituals took away their shame, wiped away their tears and made them part of God's own family." Without the larger framework of God's purpose and promise, joy would have been absurd, so Curry is once again teaching the spirituals in his church.

Some go the other direction and treat joy as proof of

the Spirit's presence. When people come to visit the urban ministries that grew out of The Church of the Saviour, questioning the level of commitment required for this kind of work, they often ask, "Are your members joyful?" My answer is, "Some are. Some aren't. Mostly we feel joy as an undercurrent of being together." With such dislocation and violence in the city we are called to, we are grateful for those who can rejoice, live with gladness and help us see grace in our foibles and failures.

According to Paul, joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), but it is neither a requirement nor a measure of one's faith. If life has been even and easy, the Holy Spirit will give us eyes to see the suffering around us. If tortured and bound, new freedom will come. One of the mysteries of faith in Christ is surely the link between joy and pain, resurrection and the cross.

Authentic joy can be a sign of maturing faith. When we are young, we are self-centered and unconscious; joyful or withdrawn, depending on our temperament and family situation. As we become more conscious and explore our lives in a matrix of relationships (including God), we have the opportunity to let go of perfection and apparent control. Positive faith development can give us enough perspective to laugh at ourselves, appreciate the difficulties of being human and trust that we are needed for God's ongoing creation. *Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy* (Ps 126:2).

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When something very nice happens to you or to someone near you, and you come round to celebrating it, there can be a double remembrance. One is gratitude to God for the joyful event itself; the other is a simple joining of pleasure. The divine One suffers when you do; so also is the joy shared.

Gerald G. May, M.D., *The Awakened Heart*



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