

“Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts”

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As part of my calling as an ordained minister, I regularly attend meetings of various governing bodies within the church. I must confess that I have been struck on such occasions by many things that are wonderfully right about the denomination in which I serve. We are involved in mission all over the globe and in some really exciting ways here at home. We have a number of impressive young people who are going into the ministry. We are a generous people who give large sums of money to further Christ’s Kingdom, to the envy of many other denominations. Yet I find that I rarely come away from these meetings with a sense of joy, with a lighter heart, with renewed confidence and zest for the Kingdom, but rather with more worries, no little anger, and sometimes even despair that increases as our busyness grows more impressive. Why, I wonder, is there not more joy in the church? Why, I wonder, does our church not understand itself, primarily, as the bearer of joy to the world?

Alexander Schmemmann, an Orthodox priest and former dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary, has written that the modern world is suspicious of joy.

How can one be joyful when so many people suffer? When so many things are to be done? How can one indulge in festivals and celebrations when people expect from us “serious” answers to their problems? Consciously or unconsciously Christians have accepted the whole ethos of our joyless and business-minded culture. They believe that the only way to be taken “seriously” by the “serious” – that is, by a modern man – is to be serious, and, therefore, to reduce to a symbolic “minimum” what in the past was so tremendously central in the life of the Church – the joy of a feast.¹

In his *Journals*, Father Schmemmann goes on to add, “Joy is not one of the components of Christianity, it’s the *tonality* of Christianity that penetrates everything.... Where there is no joy, Christianity becomes... torture.”²

I think Schmemmann is right. I think much of our misery today as a church is not best described by “rounding up the usual suspects”: declining numbers, the cultural irrelevance of an aging church, the debate between traditional vs. contemporary forms of worship, the bashing of one another in unwinnable arguments over human sexuality. Rather, I think what describes the true pathos of our situation is our joylessness, our inability to articulate and rejoice in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death, and our deafness to his gracious invitation to participate in the joy of the life he shares with us in his Word and sacrament. Embarrassed by the apparent paucity of such gifts, we are, nevertheless, eager to engage a wide range of other issues that seem to us more promising. We are, after all, busy people. We do good. We are generous. We are smart. We are an extraordinarily helpful and compassionate people. But all of this, I suspect, indicates not a celebration of the joy that is ours in Jesus Christ, but rather a fleeing from such a gift because it threatens to reveal us as the needy creatures we are. The result is that we are left with a disquieting sense that something at the heart

of our life together is missing or has gone disastrously wrong. We have grown busy but not joyful. We can plan for rejoicing and study the matter; we can frame worship services in the name of joy, but the joy of the gospel that Jesus says is rightfully ours (John 16:22) remains, for us, frustratingly elusive and oddly inarticulate.

Now, of course there is a danger here, a big one, and that is that by “joy” one concludes that what is meant is “fun” or even “uplift.” Schmemmann, in his book, *For the Life of the World*, writes: “The modern world has relegated joy to the category of “fun” and “relaxation.” It is justified and permissible on our “time off”; it is a concession and compromise (to the serious business of life). And Christians have come to believe this, or rather they have ceased to believe that (joy has) something to do precisely with the ‘serious problems’ of life itself, may even be *the* Christian answer to them.”³ Fun is not what joy is about. Indeed, the real enemy of joy is self-absorption, endless amusement that is easily bored and always in need of something more exotic. The result is that most familiar of contemporary maladies, a certain heaviness of self, what Luther would have called “the heart curved in on itself.”

In the Orthodox liturgy, however, joy is seen to be something different. In that liturgy, Schmemmann reminds us, there is a phrase that proclaims, “for through the Cross, joy came into the whole world.”⁴ “Through the cross....” To a culture that seeks “to amuse itself to death” or be “on 24/7,” such a notion can only seem weird, if not impossible. Yet in Scripture as in life, rather than being a kind of constant self-diversion, joy takes the form of genuine humility, the true evidence of self-forgetfulness. That God redeems the world from misery, from boredom, and even from the violence that Mel Gibson thinks somehow authenticates the faith—that the cross, rather, is the way that joy comes into our world—would seem to contradict the gravity of our self-importance. It is paradoxical or at least counter-intuitive that precisely at the point where Christ’s work “is finished,” it is finished as well with our grim efforts to save ourselves. Yet just so are we saved from joylessness. For it is the cross that destroys our hard-won seriousness and becomes instead an invitation to a party, a feast of self-forgetting joy in the life of one whom we have not chosen yet in whose presence we are invited “to sit and eat.” Is this not the strange way the divine comedy narrates the gift of the gospel, drawing us into the real presence of God’s own life, the life that is no stranger to the events of Good Friday or even to the utter silence of Holy Saturday, but is able to move from such darkness quite without our aid toward the dawn of a day beyond what we might imagine or conceive? In any case, it is here that we stumble upon joy, just as those two discouraged disciples stumbled upon it on their way to Emmaus. They found it on the road to resignation and despair, or rather it found them, the joy that threw their whole world “off balance” and set them free to find in broken bread and spoken word Christ’s risen presence.

So how does such joy find us? In his *Journals*, Schmemmann tells of being invited to a weekend to speak at a church celebration. He writes: “I love parish feasts, community celebrations. During the liturgy, I thought: What in my life gives me pure joy? Slanting rays of sun in church during a service.”⁵ An ordinary gift, yet just so, everything.

In another place he writes that he was in Paris, and was walking late one afternoon in the early winter in a blighted section of an old suburb and witnessed in the failing light and warmth of that afternoon, an old and poor couple sitting on a park bench together. “They were sitting hand in hand, in silence, enjoying the pale light, the last

warmth of the day. In silence: all words had been said, all passion exhausted – yet all of it was now *present*, in this silence, in this light, in this warmth, (in this moment), in this silent unity of hands. Present – and ready for eternity, ripe for joy...”⁶ Joy is not imaged here as a youthful couple having “fun”; this is not a picture of a sexually vigorous couple lolling on the beach in the sun, but a couple who seem to be participating in the gift that life has been and is, who have shared that gift with each other, and who receive it each day from the hand of God. Here is a joy that is not seeking to be helpful or smart or even successful, but is recognized in that old term from sacramental theology, that is, in its “real presence,” a gift that has left the spectacular, exotic, ecstatic behind, but which manifests itself in the ordinary gifts of life and finds in them a glimpse of God’s gracious presence in Jesus Christ. Yet just so, here, it must also be confessed, is a mystery, the mystery of a joy whose presence, though it resists all our efforts to manage it or turn it into achievement, nevertheless, refuses to leave us alone. This is a presence others have noticed as well.

At the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha, the novice priest, preaches a sermon to the boys who have come to be his disciples. A part of that sermon reads:

You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days. And if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving him.⁷

The old couple espied by Schmemmann, the young boys to whom Karamazov is speaking, bear witness in their separate ways to the mysterious presence that mediates the joy of Christ’s death and resurrection. This is the one “sacred memory” that is enough to keep us to the end of our days, the one “sacred memory” that renders the ordinary gifts of life into signs that refer us beyond ourselves to the Easter joy that alone can keep us from despairing when everything else in our life argues that we should. Such joy is less an emotion we feel than it is a “real presence” that indwells us and that gives us to know, against all the evidence to the contrary, that life is a good gift, whose goodness is mysterious most of all to ourselves. Such a presence is not an uplifting sense of well-being attainable only by optimistic and well-fixed people, but a gift that emerges from the ordinary scenes of life – the way a sunflower can overpower one’s heart, the way a tree’s branches scratch at the winter sky, the way a smile greets us on a rainy day, the way a good weariness can enfold us at the close of the day. Just so do these gifts become witnesses to that One whose passion transformed death to life.

But the mystery of such joy goes deeper. Alan Jacobs has recently written of the poet Linda Gregerson, whose poetry is almost too powerful to bear.⁸ In her poem, “Pass Over” she begins by describing an abused child:

1. Plague of Darkness

You point a camera at a kid, the kid

will try
 to smile, he said. No matter part

 of his mouth is missing, eyelid
 torn,
 the rest of his face such a mass

 of infection and half-healed burns they'll
 never
 make it right again. You know

 what the surgeon found in his scalp?
 Pencil lead.
 Six broken points of it, puncture wounds

 some of them twelve months old. They figure
 the mother
 made him wear a ski mask for those

 thousand-and-some-odd miles on the bus
 or why
 didn't somebody turn her in? The kid

 is eight, the camera belongs to forensics, and
 he thinks
 he's supposed to smile. Do the math.

 If anyone were in charge, my vote is to scrap us
 and start over.⁹

Now this poem is, as Jacobs notes, almost brutally direct, and its concluding verse hard to argue with. The pain of those concluding words is echoed almost precisely in Ivan Karamazov's words to his brother, Alyosha: "It's not God that I don't accept," Ivan says, "only I most respectfully return the ticket to him."¹⁰ Ivan, like Linda Gregerson, has his own "collection of facts" gathered from newspaper clippings and other accounts of children horribly abused. He too has taken note of the world we live in and has concluded that evil is so deeply embedded in the human heart that no future reconciling good can ever make things right, no eternal harmony can ever justify the hurt done to a child, no blissful peace ever redeem the suffering of an innocent little one. Ivan doesn't really care if God exists or not, but if God does, all he wants to tell God is what Linda Gregerson so eloquently, if painfully observes: "If anyone here were in charge, my vote is scrap us and start over." At least spare me the notion that there is something "out there" that could square all of this: "Do the math," as the poet says.

In the novel, Alyosha objects to Ivan's "Euclidean geometry" by appealing to Christ's forgiving grace, a move that Ivan has anticipated and that prompts him to recount for Alyosha the long prose poem, "The Grand Inquisitor," in which Jesus is

imagined to have visited Seville during the Inquisition and is imprisoned there as a heretic and ultimately exiled because the Church cannot abide his presence. Jesus upsets the Inquisitor's math. Before leaving the city, however, Jesus turns to the Grand Inquisitor, who longs for him to say something bitter and terrible, if for no other reason than to "square things," that is, to prove that the evil the Inquisitor intended was still capable of provoking judgment and to that extent, still powerful. Instead, Jesus "approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on the forehead. That was his answer."¹¹ At the end of this parable, Alyosha does the same to his miserable brother, Ivan, who hates the world he sees and hates even more the claim that such a place is a gift of a good and gracious God. Alyosha approaches Ivan, and softly kisses him on the forehead. "That's plagiarism," Ivan cries.¹² As indeed it is.

Which, I suppose, is just another name for Christian discipleship, for which of us can imitate Christ? We do well just to plagiarize, and even then our copies are of poor quality, if not contemptible things in themselves. Yet Alyosha's kiss suggests something more than the quiet despair over an unhappy brother. In its way it becomes a kind of witness, a true witness (a true "copy" for all its flaws) to Jesus Christ, a profoundly articulate claiming of Ivan's life as a mysterious gift, a gift belonging to the Crucified, whose grace is never more non-Euclidean than in its love for a sinful and broken world that has neither sought nor really wanted such love. Such a kiss, like the abused boy's smile in Gregerson's poem, seems curiously unflappable in its stupid goodness. What has fascinated Ivan up to this point and what fascinates the modern world is "the problem of evil," why "bad things happen to good people." But what Gregerson's poem hints at and Dostoyevsky's novel brilliantly unfolds is the enduring mystery of goodness, even the joy at the heart of life that evil does not seem to be able to overcome or entirely obscure. The kid tries to smile. Dumb kid, his face torn to shreds, he thinks that when a camera is pointed at him, that he is supposed to smile. Jacobs concludes:

And that, when you think about it, is an astonishing thing.... After all he has been through – enough indeed to make a reasonable person vote to scrap us and start over – he finds, from somewhere inside – some obscure and even hidden part known only, perhaps, to God the Crucified One – the trust, the hope, to smile when that human-hearted man from forensics points the camera lens at his poor ravaged face. What that camera records, of course, is a terrible judgment on all of us who have helped make, or have allowed to be made, a world in which a mother can for so long abuse her son so grossly; and that judgment is so terrible that it can conceal from us ... its other message: that hope and trust are possible even from the most profoundly wounded among us....¹³

But out of such judgment and grace, what is revealed is more than the resiliency of children or the willingness to give the world another chance. No, what is revealed out of such judgment and grace is the inexpungeability of God's mysterious goodness, hammered into this world on the cross, yielding a joy that has no rightful place in this world but keeps showing up in the most surprising ways, like a stupid, persistent smile on a torn-up face, or a resurrected Lord who, having come through locked doors, identifies himself by inviting his surprised disciples to touch his wounds. Such fearful

joy simply won't go away, simply refuses to leave us to our own devices or to our own despair.

Of course, it is not entirely true to say that joy has "no rightful place" in the world. That is only true for a world that thinks its job is to construct itself, to make God useful for its own purposes. Such labor is indeed hard work and accounts, I believe, for much of the joylessness of our own life as a church as we labor to bring the world into some version of our own Euclidean balance, as opposed to receiving our life from him who insists on giving his away. The moment we cease to understand our life together in Christ as a gift, the moment we turn it into a project, something that requires our management, then precisely at that moment the joy that rightfully belongs to those who have received life from the self-giving life of Christ becomes something else, something much less surprising and altogether more tedious. "Of all accusations against Christians, the most terrible one," Schmemmann reminds us, is the one "uttered by Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy."¹⁴ Yet just so, it would be a terrible misreading of the New Testament to conclude that joy is a project we can undertake. Rather, as we have seen, it is a gift, "the great joy" that is given to shepherds and that draws wise men, "the great joy" that disbelieves in wonderment in the presence of the risen Lord (Luke 24: 41), the "great joy" that overtakes the twenty-four elders and that beckons to all who suffer persecution or distress, who long for the marriage feast of the lamb, and who join with the elders and myriads of angels in crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come...."(Rev 19:6,7).

How then is such a gift recovered?

The gospel is often simple but it is never obvious. In volume III/4 of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth has a section on what he calls the "meaning of Sunday freedom," which is what he calls worship. The joy that Sunday worship holds out for us comes not from a commitment on our part to do something, much less to do nothing, but from the gift of the day itself, the way it interrupts our lives with its claims, and so in its strangeness "corresponds to the great interruption of the everyday world history by Easter Day,"¹⁵ a sign that indicates that our freedom is not to be found in trusting in our work but in the One who has truly brought our work to an end ("It is finished," John 19:30) and who has ushered in a new day, a day best described as a feast.

"Joy" writes Barth, is "the meaning of this Sunday freedom."¹⁶ Joy. It is the day of celebrating the feast and remembering precisely not what we have done but what God has done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Here too there is a risk, especially for those in the Reformed tradition, for as good organizers, we are quite capable of thinking that such a feast of joy must mean that we must get busy and achieve sufficient levels of joyful activity. But Barth cautions us against doing anything programmatic. Instead he has a word to say both to the congregation and then to the pastor. He writes:

The church must not allow itself to become dull, nor its services dark and gloomy. It must be claimed by, and proclaim, the lordship of God in the kingdom of his dear Son rather than the lordship of the devil or capitalism or communism or human folly and wickedness in general.... Who otherwise will believe it when it says that the holy day is made the day of joy for men and therefore the day of God?¹⁷

But Barth has a word also for preachers. He acknowledges the impossibility of working at being joyful, but then notes that it is when we are joyfully occupied that our work actually becomes a liberating activity. So what is the great joy of the one who is called as “Minister of Word and Sacrament”?

As we all know, the minister’s Sunday involves both a program and work, yet does this mean that [she or] he has to bemoan it? Is not the minister the ideal case of [the one] who works joyfully on the holy day and in this very way keeps it holy? If it were toilsome and dull for ministers to do their Sunday work, how could they expect the congregation and the world to find it refreshing? If theology as such is not a joy to the theologian, if in his theological work he is not genuinely free from care, what is it? Can he then abandon it on Sunday and devote himself to all sorts of tomfoolery? Why should he not be free for theology? ...Fundamentally, cannot the heaviest theological working day be for him the best day of rest?¹⁸

Like Tevye, whose vision of being a rich man was crowned with an image of himself studying the Torah all day long in the company of rabbis, an image rich with the joy that is the gift of “the holy day,” so Barth thinks preaching, teaching, and above all, worshiping, mediate joy to us in inviting us to the feast which is the rabbi, Jesus. That is the great gift of this day: joy in Christ. This, after all, truly “is the joyful feast of the people of God.” Here we eat God’s word and celebrate the Presence that refuses to leave us in darkness. Here we remember how joy came into the world even as we show forth the Lord’s death until he comes.

Notes

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the Word* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 53.
2. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973-1983* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 137.
3. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 53.
4. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 55.
5. Schmemmann, *Journals*, 82.
6. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 90.
7. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1980), 699.
8. Alan Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truth-telling* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004). Jacobs deals with Gregerson’s poetry in his chapter on “The Judgment of Grace.”
9. Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil*, 60-61. Gregerson’s poem, “Pass Over,” can be found in her collection, *Waterborne* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 34-38.
10. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 226.
11. *Ibid*, 242.
12. *Ibid*, 243.
13. Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil*, 82.
14. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 24.
15. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed., G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 64-65.
16. *Ibid*, 68.
17. *Ibid*, 69.
18. *Ibid*, 68.