

What Does Joy Look Like?

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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Yesterday my niece, aged eight, was telling me about how excited her baby sister was the other day when her dad was playing with her. The baby isn't crawling yet, but she can sit up with some support. On this particular day, my niece reported, the baby was so overflowing with joy her little arms were waving up and down and she was rocking back and forth with squeals and giggles. She's not ambulatory yet, but she was moving everything she could. Can you picture it? Those joyful baby giggles and wiggles? Not even trying to contain her delight? I think that's what David must have looked like dancing his heart out before the Ark of the Covenant.

It's a whole parade with dancing and singing and the music of lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. Because David is leading the procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant to the hill of Zion in the city that has been named for him. The Ark of the Covenant has been reverently carried with the Israelites all through their wilderness journey and kept safe during their time in the Promised Land. It contains the stone tablets upon which God wrote God's commandments at Mt. Sinai. Keeping the commandments is Israel's side of the bargain or covenant. And God covenants to lift up the Israelites from the bondages of slavery to a flourishing people walking in goodness and righteousness. And God covenants faithfulness and steadfast love for God's people.

God's presence and promise are the cause of today's celebration. In the city of David, the procession stops and David dances ecstatically before the Ark of the Covenant. I imagine it as a long drum solo in the middle of a rock concert, just letting everything out. This is not dancing that befits a stately king. And David is not wearing clothes that befit a stately king. He's wearing a thin linen shift. He couldn't care less about what other people think of him. That's what joy looks like.

Have you ever experienced that? Being swept up in joy so completely that you don't care what you look like, even if others would think you look silly, you're just in the moment? Usually that kind of joy happens in community. It's contagious and it reverberates back and forth among the people. Maybe it's happened at a dinner party with close friends where the jokes get sillier and sillier and you laugh till the tears come. Maybe it's happened at a social event here at church. Maybe it's happened for you at a larger community event like a parade, just like it did for David and his people. Maybe at a homecoming parade, a pride parade, or a 4th of July parade. Everyone is swept up in the moment together.

But while our passage today shows the exuberant joy of celebrating God in community, it is set in the context of a larger story containing the whole spectrum of human emotions and experiences. A person ecstatic with joy is not a person without pain. At the beginning of this chapter David loses himself in a song of lament for Saul, the former king, and for Saul's son Jonathon. In the beginning of their relationship we are told that "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul," and that, "Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul." Grieving over Jonathan's death, David sings, "greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." David is a man who knows deep loss and pain as well as ecstatic joy. Amy G. Oden writes, "Lament and joy share the same root system in the same ground. In fact, our capacity for celebrative joy is in proportion to our capacity for lament and grief." And perhaps you can relate to that too. We all experience grief at some point in our lives, but it doesn't prevent us from experiencing joy. In fact, as Oden writes, perhaps our capacities for joy and grief are proportional to one another. Joy does not simply look like an absence of lamentation. They can even be experienced at the same time, in the same room, in the same heart. If you've ever been to a funeral where family is gathered round laughing as they share stories, you know what I mean. And being in the presence of those who understand our lamentations can make for a space that is safer to express our inhibited joy.

You may have noticed that there is one person in our reading who is on the outside of everyone else's celebration. We read: "Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart." At the end of the day Michal bitterly confronts David about dancing ridiculously in front of everyone while scantily clothed "as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" David snaps back that he can do as he pleases since God chose him to lead over Michal's father. Their relationship had started out positive enough. We are told that she loved David and at one point she even saved David's life. But ever since David rose to the throne, Saul loyalists have striven to get it back. Had Michal given birth to a son, these loyalists would have a legitimate heir to Saul to put on the throne. By the time the Ark comes to Zion, David has other wives. At this point Michal is more of a liability to David than a viable wife. He keeps her around not so much to father children with her, but more to keep anyone else from fathering children with her. I imagine she must feel discarded and imprisoned. No wonder she's bitter about David's charisma among the people and can't join the fun.

And perhaps you've experienced that too. Being in the midst of other people lost in joy, but not being able to join in yourself. Maybe because you express joy in a different way, maybe different things bring you joy. Before, I mentioned the communal joy of homecoming parades, pride parades, and 4th of July parades. Would you feel equally comfortable losing yourself in joy in any of those settings? Or would some feel more relatable than others? How crucial is it to be with other people who know your experiences both positive and negative? I know there are some communities whose joy I can relate to and whose silliness I participate in more than others. I was talking about this with a colleague and she said, "I

believe playfulness comes from people's confidence in being who they are and being in community."

I believe that when we grieve our losses, like David does, God grieves with us. I believe that when we dance for joy, like David does, God dances with us. And I believe that when we are in a community that doesn't make us feel safe enough to dance for joy, like Michal was, God holds us. And sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, those different things are happening in the same room at the same time. But God's presence is the same. To others, when we are lost in joy, we may seem absurd, but God doesn't judge. To others, when we are not celebrating, we may seem like a wet blanket, but God doesn't judge. God's presence, through our times of lament and fear and contentment and joy, is something worth celebrating, whatever that looks like for you. Amen.