

Introduction to Lent:

In the Sermon on the Mount, **Jesus** declares unequivocally:

God gives **God's** best to everyone: the sun to shine, the rain to refresh, the soil to supply nourishment. **God** gives unstintingly, always and everywhere, generosity without end.

So what blocks our joy?

Vicki and I have been reading The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World. It is based on the weeklong visit, in April 2015, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to celebrate His Holiness's 80th birthday. Throughout the week they looked back on their long lives to answer a single burning question: ***How do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering?*** Author Douglas Abrams pieces it all together with cutting edge scientific research. The final product is a gift for our times.

Our Sunday worship for the season of Lent will explore ***what blocks our joy***, with reference to the temptations in the wilderness and the insights of this book. Two weeks ago, we looked at FOMO: Fear of Missing Out, and the Scarcity Model: Will there be enough for me?

Last week we saw that there are no shortcuts to serving **God** and no shortcut to sharing love, compassion and generosity which create lasting joy.

This week we explore the way loneliness and envy separates us from **God** and one another blocking our ***joy***.

When we recognize how our ***joy*** is blocked, we can make choices and engage spiritual practices that free us to experience the ***joy*** that **God** intends for us. In the process our Christian life grows and deepens into ***joy***.

March 19, 2017 Lent 3

We all have been at a party or a large gathering surrounded by other people and felt we just didn't fit in or have anyone to talk to. It has happened to me more than a few times, most noticeably when I'm wearing my clerical collar.

Isn't it strange how we can feel all alone in a crowd and totally connected in solitude? It all depends upon our attitude or in my case my attire. Envy and comparisons and judgements cause us to feel separate from others and this in turn makes us feel lonely. And yet, an open heart filled with trust and friendship connects us to others where ever we are.

We know how loneliness and envy separate us from **God** and one another. We know them when we feel the blues. They both focus on self-referencing or the first person pronouns: *I, I, I; me, me, me; mine, mine, mine*. Loneliness and envy see the world as a zero sum game, that there is only one slice of cake in which someone else's taking more means I get less.

Too much self-focus is even bad for our health, leading to stress, high blood pressure, and the risk of heart attack. With too much self-referencing our vision becomes narrow and so even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbearable. With too much self-focus we can't stop comparing. As a Buddhist teaching explains *"We envy the people above us, are competitive toward our equals, and have contempt for the people below us."*

This is not a happy picture. We know how envy and loneliness cause us to suffer. We know how easily they block our **joy**.

Jesus knew too. The third temptation in the wilderness places him upon a high mountain overlooking a vision of all the kingdoms of the world, replete with all the wealth and riches of empires. *"Just give your heart to this wealth and power,"* says the tempter. *"Just worship material existence and its god and it is all yours."*

But **Jesus** knows the envy and loneliness of such a choice. He knows how all of this would separate him from **God**. To want it all, and have it all without caring about **God** and all whom **God** loves is dehumanizing. “**No! Worship God and serve only God.**” is his reply.

In the Sermon on the Mount, **Jesus** makes this even clearer. “***Do not store up riches on earth which perish... rather store up riches in heaven which last. For your heart will be where your riches are.***” **Jesus** is challenging us to expand our choices beyond the material to the relational. Life is found in our relationships. Loving kindness, compassion, generosity, gratitude make life worth living, and **Jesus** wants us to get the message.

Arch Bishop *Tutu* points to a way forward from unhealthy self-focus to the expanded focus of “**Ubuntu**”. “**Ubuntu**” is the African wisdom that says “***we are who we are through one another. Our humanity is bound up in one another.***” Envy and loneliness dissolve as we embrace this wider perspective, and we come to what the *Dali Lama* calls open heartedness or warm heartedness.

In other words we shift from “***It’s all about me to it’s all about us***”. We shift from a zero sum game to the super-abundance of grace. We reduce our suffering by increasing our perspective and awareness of others. We accept that we are all in this together, and find strength in all these relational possibilities. This is how we connect with **God** and one another, and experience the limitlessness of *joy*.

Here is a simple daily practice, a prayer of sorts adapted from **The Book of Joy**. It is printed in the bulletin.

Lenten Practice

As for suffering I don’t want any;

as for happiness I always want more.

In this, there is no difference between others and me.

Inspire me so I may take joy in others’ happiness and wellbeing.

Lenten Practices for the Week

Adapted from the Book of Joy by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams.

Loneliness - a common humanity practice

The Dalai Lama notes that the things that divide us (our race, gender) are much less significant than the things that unite us. (our common humanity, our human emotions)

1. **Think of someone you love.** Bring their image into your mind and allow yourself to feel the love you have for them.
2. **Imagine their desire to be happy and to avoid suffering.** Reflect on how they live their life to achieve these aspirations.
3. **Think of someone you know but do not know well.** Notice how your feelings are different from the first person you had in mind. Imagine their life, their hopes, their fears. Just like you, they wish to achieve happiness and avoid suffering.
4. **Take this awareness to the world.** With this new found connection open your heart to those around you. Begin by smiling or acknowledging the other person by looking at them and nodding your head. Just like you, they wish to achieve happiness and avoid suffering.

Envy

1. **Imagine the person who has something that you envy.**
2. **Recognize your shared humanity.** Focus on the hopes, dreams and fears of the person. Just like you, the person you envy wishes to achieve happiness and avoid suffering.
3. **Image their happiness in what they have.**
4. **Rejoice in their good fortune.**