

Joy-Part II

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72
Romans 15:4-9
Matthew 3:1-12

Everyone is looking for happiness, but hardly anyone is finding it! Why? Last week, we looked at how easy it is for us to mistake pleasure and consolation for joy, when in reality, they are significantly different things. *Pleasure* has to do with tangible, sensible gratification that we feel like we've earned or deserve, while *consolation* is our attempt to fill a void in our life. *Joy*, however, is about union and relationship. Ultimately, **joy is found in the Presence of God!** Numerous Scripture passages testify to this fact.

You [God] will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence...
-Psalm 16:11a

You [God] gladden [us] with the joy of your presence.
-Psalm 21:7b

God's Presence can be understood in two particular ways. First, all of creation is *in God*. Saint Thomas Aquinas expressed this reality in his famous *Summa Theologica*, writing, "All created perfections are in God" (Part 1, Question 4, Article 2). In other words, God contains within Himself all of us, every molecule of creation in its perfection. That is how He is able to see us and know us as we *truly* are. An inadequate image of this idea is to think of God as a huge sphere that contains all of creation. Creation only exists in God; apart from God there is nothing. This is our primordial presence with God.

In addition to our being *in God* as He created us to be, He is also *in us*. Jesus expressed this intimate union in the Gospel of John when He said, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23). In the next chapter, Jesus continues the same lesson, saying, "Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me" (John 15:4).

God's Presence, experienced in our union with Him, is what brings us joy. This naturally leads us to the question—how do we enter into the Presence of God? The Bible mentions several important things that help to lead us into God's Presence, and therefore, into joy. This week, I am going to focus on just one of those things—God's creation.

I have mentioned many times before that created things can be distractions in life. When we become too preoccupied with them, or when we expect from them things that they can't give us, they become idols and lead us away from God and joy.¹ However, when we let God's creation lead us into His Presence, then we find authentic joy. Sacred Scripture is full of examples of how creation can help us be more aware of God's Presence and, therefore, lead us

¹ The prophet Isaiah mentions this, asking, "Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2). Paul reiterates this lesson, writing, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit; (Romans 14:17).

into joy.² My favorite Scriptural example is the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke. As I read an excerpt from the story, listen to how Zacchaeus used creation to lead him into God's Presence.

[Jesus] came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And he came down quickly and received him with joy.

-Luke 19:1-6

Zacchaeus used creation, more specifically, a sycamore tree, to enter into the Presence of Christ and it brought him tremendous joy. Zacchaeus did not have improper expectations of what the sycamore tree could do; it could not be the *source* of his joy. However, the tree did lead him into the presence of God, which brought joy!

You and I are invited to use the created things in our lives in a similar way. If we try to find joy in what we own, who and what we know, where we go, and what we do, then we will continue to be surrounded by idols that leave us empty and depressed. However, when we let creation lead us into the Presence of God, we find tremendous joy!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his Principle and Foundation, encourages us to hold creation in a balance—letting it draw us into union with God without it becoming the center of our lives. Reflect on his words and then write a letter to God explaining what created things in your life are currently *in balance* and which ones are *out of balance*.

All the things in this world are gifts of God,
presented to us so that we can know God more easily
and make a return of love more readily.

As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God
insofar as they help us develop as loving persons.
But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,
they displace God and so hinder our growth toward our goal.

In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance
before all of these created gifts...

Our only desire and our one choice should be this:
I want and I choose what better leads to the deepening
of God's life in me.

-as paraphrased by David L. Fleming, S.J.

² A few of those examples include Psalm 65:1-14; Psalm 96:11-13; Psalm 98:1-9; Isaiah 65:18 and Jeremiah 31:12-14.