

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 16, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Prequel to Joy

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
Psalm 40
1 Corinthians 1:1-3
John 1:29-34

The first time I ever heard the word, “prequel,” it was in regards to the Star Wars movies. Apparently, George Lucas has been credited, at least by some people, with devising the term. A prequel is “a work that supplements a previously completed one and has an earlier time setting.”¹ Today’s sermon is a *prequel* to the series that I preached on joy during the Advent Season. I want to share with you what led to the series on joy and what I learned from it.

Before I begin this prequel, let me explain what I mean when I say that God “spoke” to me. I realize that I occasion mention my conversations with God during Mass. It’s important for you to know that I do not mean that God *audibly* speaks to me. What I generally mean, is that, over the course of days, weeks, or months, God seems to find numerous ways to get my attention (and keep my attention) on a particular thing. This often includes things that people say to me, things that I read, and feelings. After God gets my attention through these things, then I begin talking to God about them and sharing with Him how I feel and what I think. I ask for Him to confirm these promptings, especially through Scripture verses. Now, back to the prequel!

Months ago, I began feeling like God wasn’t through teaching me about detachment. The physical detachment regarding my motorcycle and music had happened between three and three and a half years ago. During that time, I felt like I had come to a wonderful place of peace about those things, as well as others. However, I felt like God was telling me that I had partly missed the point. I began spending time talking to Him about it. The more I prayed the more it seemed like He was saying that the detachment He most desired for me involved a transformation of my heart, not simply a letting go of things physically. To my surprise, I felt like God wanted me to invite some things back into my life and to learn how to properly enjoy them.

The very first thing of thought of was the motorcycle. To my surprise, the thought of having a new motorcycle *terrified* me. What if it became an idol again?! I told God that I was not willing to take that chance. For several days He seemed to hound me about it. Eventually, I told Him that I would not even consider reintroducing something into my life that I had spent so much time detaching from unless He was willing to teach me about authentic joy. God not only taught me about joy, but He taught me about a new way of praying.

For a couple of months, I used a new style of prayer with the hope of learning more about joy. This began with the dictionary. I looked up words like—joy, happiness, consolation, and pleasure. Each time I looked up a word, I talked to God about what I was learning and asked Him to teach me. It took days to simply learn the subtle differences between these words, as well as their connection to one another. Next, I used the Amplified Bible and the New American Bible to look up all of the references to joy. Each day in prayer I would look at one or more Scripture references about joy and share with God what the Scripture verses stirred up in my heart and what I felt I was learning from them.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prequel>

I really enjoyed this style of prayer and found a new excitement and energy in my prayer time. My days were also filled with greater joy. I noticed that I was taking more time to discern the differences between consolation, pleasure, and joy in the various decisions that I made throughout the day. Eventually, I worked my way through 250 Biblical references to joy. As I neared the end, I was still nervous about the idea of letting something back into my life that I had detached from and I wondered what practical steps to take.

I called a parishioner and asked him if I could borrow one of his motorcycles. I figured I'd feel better about wrecking a friend's motorcycle than one from a dealership. Of course, I didn't tell him this... but I guess he knows now...

After riding his bike for about a week, I decided to begin looking at motorcycles again; a few months ago, I purchased a new one. I have been enjoying the new bike. When I ride it, I am aware of how it is a gift from God and that He desires for me to find joy in it without making it an idol. I'm finding that detachment and joy are challenging dispositions of the heart. In addition to the new bike, I have found a new prayer tool. Since the lesson on joy, I have occasionally used the same prayer style with other topics and have found it to be an intimate and beautiful way to pray. It seems to compliment a more contemplative, silent style of prayer.

So... there's the prequel to my sermon series on joy! If you've been struggling in your prayer life, I highly recommend trying the style of prayer that I just described. You might do what I did and simply start with a topic that has been heavy on your heart. Then, study it with God. Let Him teach you new things about the subject and about yourself!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ A great online tool for study a particular word in the Bible is www.biblegateway.com. While it does not have the New American Bible, it does have numerous other searchable translations and a great search engine.
- ✚ If you were going to study one topic with Jesus—the Teacher—which one would it be right now in your life? Why would you want to know more about it?