

### *The Subversiveness of Joy*

“Having a good dog is the closest some of us will ever come to knowing the direct love of a mother, or God, so it’s no wonder it knocked the stuffing out of Sam and me when Sadie died,” writes Anne Lamott. “I promised Sam we’d get another puppy someday, but privately I resolved to never get another dog. I didn’t want to hurt that much again, if I could possibly avoid it. And I didn’t want my child’s heart to break like that again. But you don’t always get what you want; you get what you get. This is a real problem for me. You want to protect your child from pain, and what you get instead is life, and grace; and though theologians insist that grace is freely given, the truth is that sometimes you pay for it through the nose. And you can’t pay your child’s way. We should never have gotten a dog to begin with – they all die. While it is subversive when artists make art that will pass away in the fullness of time, or later that day, it’s not as ennobling when your heart breaks.”<sup>1</sup>

Isn’t that the truth?

There’s something about the fear of having your heart broken, or your family’s hearts broken, that is just enough to scare you into not wanting to have a dog at all.

But if you boil her philosophy down, it isn’t really about the dogs, is it?

To live risking *love* is to open ourselves to the possibility of heartache.

We are finite beings, and that which we love, those whom we love... well, Ecclesiastes reminds us it all blows away in the end.

Or perhaps it is not so dramatic. Perhaps, one day we wake up to a numbness and a disconnection from our sources of joy.

Would that leave us craving a song that can subvert the painful moments of life?

It is often claimed that the Gospel is a subversive song, but I wonder if the claim has been made so frequently, and offered so often without substance, as to be rendered meaningless?

It does seem at times as though we are in a period when the effectiveness of words to communicate meaning is a casualty of the intractability of our entrenched views.

Perhaps we need a better definition of what it is to be subversive, one that declares what it is we hope to subvert in the first place, a word that declares us to be in opposition to an anything that says, “This is as good as it gets.”

The apostle Paul suggests just such a word in his letter to the Thessalonians.

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<sup>1</sup> Lamott, Anne. Plan B. pp81-82

This scripture is the oldest book in the New Testament.

In an unusual move for Paul, who so frequently seemed to be pressed into correspondence to *correct* the trajectory of the churches he started, this letter is written simply because he *loves* them.

His companions on his journeys have been in touch with the Thessalonians, and they report to Paul nothing more pressing than that the church *misses* him.

It is the sort of ache that comes not from great injury, but from great *love*.

As Paul's correspondence goes, it's an easy read; you can knock it out in under twenty minutes. And while good bits of it might seem to be formulaic advice on how to live a decent life, there is a turn in the fourth chapter that grounds what Paul is teaching about our way of life in a future reality of God's grace that is more powerful even than death.

Before Paul tells the Thessalonians to rejoice in all things, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks constantly, he grounds their hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the promise of his return.

In that way, it is a subversive word, because it reminds us that in Jesus Christ, God even subverts *death*.

When death comes, it is *love* that brings the ache, isn't it?

One of you told me not long ago how hard you found it to come to church during a particularly hard time, that it was difficult to sit in the pew and be surrounded by happy people, and that it was exquisitely painful to sing the hymns when your heart was breaking, but that nonetheless you couldn't *not* do it, because those very words carried the comfort needed.

*Isn't it always the singing that cracks us open?*

Paul is admonishing us to sing a subversive song all the time so that when we come to our harder moments, it is the language of faith that jumps to our tongues, and gives voice to the subversive promises of God.

Paul comes by his insights honestly.

In Advent, we so often hear from the Prophet Isaiah. We read from the third period of Isaiah's prophecy, the part when the exiles are coming back to what the prophet suggests is a ruined country.

If there were ever a scripture for people feeling disconnected, disintegrated, discombobulated, it is this third section of Isaiah. They are returning to a city they love, whose shalom mattered a great deal to them, and whose destruction they were seemingly powerless to stave off.

This is the moment they have anticipated for so long, aching to return home, to come back to the place they love, the city that grounds and roots them.

They know what it is mourn, to sit in ashes, to live with a failing spirit. They can see the ruins, the devastation, and they know what it will take to rebuild.

They need a word from the Lord.

Isaiah invites them to look beyond what they can see, and to remember who God has been, and to remember that God has always been in the business of raising up new life from the ashes of what has been obliterated, even when the obliteration is self-inflicted.

God has a long history of not erasing what has been, but instead redeeming what will yet be.

God's promise is overwhelming, but let's be clear: The promise is *not* that it will be *easy*.

I am reminded of Flannery O'Conner's short story, *The Enduring Chill*.

O'Conner weaves the tale of a young man, Asbury, who has lived his whole life believing he is dying. In a reversal of fortune, he learns after a priest and a physician have been called, that he is not dying at all, but that his life will never be easy. As he contemplates this new reality, O'Conner writes,

"A blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud. Below it the tree line was black against the crimson sky. It formed a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming. The boy fell back on his pillow and stared at the ceiling. His limbs that had been racked for so many weeks with fever and chill were numb now. The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of the new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, *but enduring*, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend."<sup>2</sup>

Divine love does not play by our rules.

But divine love is the basis of all joy.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Conner, Flannery. Everything that Rises Must Converge. p114.

The subversiveness of joy offers something different about life, and faith, and who we want to be. Joy reminds us that it matters that we come and gather together because we love each other. Even when we don't love each other, we love each other.

That sort of durable love leads to the inscrutable joy that comes from God, and orients us so that we may live the way Paul suggested we might, that we may hear what Isaiah has prophesied, and know who God is.

*Rejoice*, Paul says.

*Rejoice*, Isaiah says.

Knowing the circumstances behind their joy, I am reminded of a favorite scrap of poetry, from Wendell Berry, "Be joyful, even though you have considered all the facts."

Really, what did Mary have to be joyful over?

Please don't think me too flippant, but let's consider all the facts, shall we?

There is more to this story than just having an angel show up with good tidings.

Sure, Gabriel sneaks in, tells Mary that the Holy Spirit is going to overshadow her, and she is going to be great with child, and she replies, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Knowing what she knows about the Romans, her homeland, everything she could imagine would suggest that if Gabriel is telling the truth, the life of the child she will bear will be *hard*.

Life will be hard for her child, and hard for his mother.

Then, the next thing we see, she is few counties away staying with her cousin.

Say what you will, but this is the first century equivalent of being sent to another state in the middle of junior year to care for an elderly aunt before the pregnancy can show and embarrass the family.

It is not a natural impulse under such circumstances to break into song.

Have you ever noticed that Mary doesn't start singing the minute Gabriel leaves her?

It is just a few verses; if we weren't paying attention, we might miss it, but Mary doesn't start her song just yet.

She starts singing *after* she is received, and believed, with love.

The subversive fact of *love* is the basis for the subversive song of *joy*.

Which brings us to the main thing: It is the sharing of love that subverts the powers of destruction and prepares the way for the coming of joy.

Faith may lend us a great many wondrous things: Comfort in the face of sorrow, companionship in the face of loneliness, an ethic for living in an increasingly disintegrated world.

All of these things are worthy of our gratitude. But perhaps it is when faith offers us *joy* that the redemptive purposes of God break through.

You know the old joke that opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back, and instead of bleeding, he sings?

*That's also the Gospel.*

The subversiveness of joy is precisely at that moment when it seems panic is called for, when conventional wisdom says "Take the punch, lie down, and don't get up," faith sings instead that the present reality we see is not the fullness of reality, because God's joy will shine a light that allows us to see more deeply and brightly the future that is held in God's hands.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.