

“Hard to Come By”

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28 12-11-05

In 1513 Fra Giovanni wrote a beautiful letter to a friend of which the following is just a portion:

I salute you! There is nothing I can give you which
you have not; but there is much, that, while I cannot give,
you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it
today. Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this
present instant. Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet,
within our reach, is joy. Take Joy.

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you with the prayer
that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the
shadows flee away.

Some things in life seem very hard to come by. Sometimes the things we desire most are material things that seem to dance just beyond our grasp. Most often, if we persevere, we eventually acquire what it is we are after or, perhaps, finally give up trying, deciding we really do not need what we considered so essential to life.

Then there are other things that are just as elusive but that cannot be purchased for any amount of money. And, I think, as we grow older, most of us cherish these non-tangible things far more than any “baubles, bangles, or bright shiny beads.” We might say we have a shift in values and most often, it has seemed to me, for the better. We cherish love, patience, understanding and trust. I am certain each of us could make up a list of the things in life we value the most.

Remember how the nation Israel, when struggling through the desert, was always looking for food, or water or another more satisfactory god? The essentials of life would be provided for them or they would create what they believed they needed. But, as soon as their needs were supplied, something else would pop up on their wish list that they were sure would make them happy if they were given it.

Time after time they were disappointed and would begin complaining about their lot in life again. Expecting something from the outside, from someone else, to make them happy and satisfied never quite filled the bill. It’s as if God said, “there is nothing I can give you that you have not ...” That nation already possessed all it needed for life within itself, just as we possess all we need for a satisfactory life within us.

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah for this morning, we heard what it is we are asked to do once we mature as people as that nation had matured. It has nothing to do with gaining external happiness but with gaining a life of service. “To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” This is what God asks of those who declare that they believe in seeking and doing God’s will.

Paul, in his Letter to the Thessalonians, reminds those who read his words, that they are to rejoice in doing the will of God. They are to find peace and joy in this act. Perhaps, they will not

always be deliriously happy while doing God's work. After all it is hard, soul-searching work we are all asked to do. But, when done, the satisfaction that will be derived is deep and lasting.

John the Baptist must have had the same sense of satisfaction as he went about doing God's business in preparation for the one who was to come. It was vital work he felt he was called to do, He knew he was essential to the process and he understood that he was not the one who was to be its centerpiece.

This morning the candle of Joy was lit on the Advent wreath. It is to remind us of the joy we are to feel at the coming of the Christ child and the joy that can be ours if we take it throughout our lives.

Joy is not the same as happiness, it is a deeper, more soul felt emotion. Happiness can come and go brought on by events in life or by the lack of them. It may come about by the final acquisition of some material thing. The children whose dearest wishes are being fulfilled by our gifts will be very happy on Christmas Day. But that happiness may recede as time goes by and they would like newer and shinier stuff.

The quality of joy, on the other hand, dwells deep within us and sustains us even when we may feel terribly unhappy. It can be a tiny flickering light that persistently reminds us that all will be well as we journey through life facing its trial and tribulations. It can give us a sense of calm and peace. It can help us place our own small lives into perspective and help us find our rightful place in the vast panorama of life.

A dear woman always tells me that I am a "happy person" when I visit her. She also wonders why I am. When she mentions this I am always surprised. But she is right. Most often in my life I have been blessed to be happy, go-lucky. But, I am more importantly, joyful and grateful for all life has given me.

The clouds of life have certainly blown around me. And still do. I am certainly not rich in any earthly sense, but I have learned to be content. I have also found that being depressed or terribly dissatisfied with life is a waste of time for me. This is possibly a function of age. I know quite well that we have so little time to accomplish all that we want to that wasting a lot of it moping around has never been my style. I might allow myself a few hours of feeling down but that is all. I have learned from difficult past experience that dwelling in the darkness of my thoughts and what "shoulda, woulda or coulda been" is very self-defeating.

As many of you know, I also have a strange sense of humor that can see something funny in almost every event. Almost every. Never in a great tragedy. When I feel my sense of humor slipping away, I know I am in trouble. And I focus on finding it again. It is very difficult for me to deal with humorless people. I find it hard to imagine going through life never seeing anything funny in our human condition.

Somehow, somewhere, I learned to find joy in the center of my soul. It is there, for all of us, waiting to be recognized. I know it cannot be given to me by any other person. In my younger years I have definitely been there, done that. It simply does not work to put our expectations on another human to supply all our wants and needs. Another person cannot do it and should never be expected to fulfill the wishes we carry deep within ourselves. It is unfair to the other person and to our selves. I alone am responsible for how I feel about life just as I am responsible for the way I think about it. The mind is a powerful instrument in determining how it is we look at things. And we, unless we have one mental illness or another, are able to control our thoughts. We are able to discover the joy that is deep and everlasting within. Life is not so serious and grinding that there is no brightness and light in it.

So look at those purple candles of Hope, Forgiveness and, now, the pink candle of Joy. Think of the wonderful qualities they represent, qualities that we all have within us and that were revealed as necessities of life to us by Jesus. These are the essentials we need to lead lives that are satisfactory to us and to others. The essentials that we need to reach inward for and take. Amen