Surprised by Joy

How can Lent be joyful?  It is a time of penance, fasting, and abstinence.  Yet, you may have met people or heard of people who will say, “I can hardly wait until Lent.”  What they are referring to is the practice of discipline that can easily be lost over the year, especially during the holidays.  The forty days of Lent are like a reset button.  We get to honestly evaluate our life and how we live our faith.  If there is something lacking, Lent is the time to make necessary adjustments.

Of course, Lent is more than giving up cookies or saying a few more prayers.  True Lenten discipline and the refinements that Lent can bring about run deeper than what we eat or drink or how many pounds we have to lose.  The true meaning of Lent is conversion.

St. Paul lived his life in happy ignorance before his conversion.  He was probably content in his work as a Pharisee.  His happiness stemmed from the external circumstances to which he dutifully adhered as he staunchly defended what he believed was right.  He persecuted both men and women who followed the new way of Jesus.   It was not until God knocked him to the ground and surrounded him with light on the way to Damascus that he became aware of something deeper, something more fruitful and right.  It was when he was flat on his back that he began to experience an abiding sense of joy.  It was this joy that proved the authenticity of his conversion.

Lent propels us forward on a journey to joy.  Lenten joy intuits what God most desires for us.  God desires us to be wonderfully alive, at peace with ourselves and those around us.  Such a change does not happen overnight.  Conversion is a daily surrender to God’s will and direction for our lives.

In a wonderful poem by Marianne Moore, she ends with the line, “Satisfaction is a lowly thing, how pure a thing is joy.”  It is precisely because we are meant for nothing less than God that everything else appears finally unsatisfying.  St. Augustine realized this when he wrote in the first chapter of Confessions: “You made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”  Augustine overcame a troubled youth, benefitting mainly, I’m sure, from the prayers of his mother, St. Monica.  But he still had to overcome the confusing intellectual and spiritual paths that he had begun to walk.  When he came to a point where everything appeared dissatisfying, he kept on asking the question, kept seeking for true joy and, eventually, he was drawn to a discovery that blessed his entire being.

You or I might be asked on a particular day if we are happy.  It is perfectly acceptable, at times, to answer negatively.  You might say, no, I am not happy because I am saddened about the recent death of a loved one or you simply might have a toothache or a financial dilemma.  Happiness does not run very deep.  Joy, on the other hand, reaches to the core of our being.  Happiness can dry up in stressful circumstances.  Joy, which is akin to love, can weather any storm that life sends our way.  If someone were to ask me at a particular moment if I was happy being a priest, the answer might well be, “Not at the moment.”  But if you ask me if I find joy in being a priest? Is it a good way to spend my life?  My reply would be, “Absolutely.”

Lent provides us with the opportunity to explore the mystery of our own being as we see it reflected in the mystery of those around us.  We can examine the road we have taken in life.  It is never too late to make changes.  At the beginning of Lent, try asking yourself the following questions - Is my life’s work a source of joy for me?  Secondly, is the way I am living my life tapping into my God-given talents?  And thirdly, am I providing a service to the people around me?

No one can tell you, “This is your joy.”  Others may be able to assist us in our discernment, but no one has the final say on what moves us to the core of our being.  And, finally, it is important to remember that we never finish asking the question.  Joy can surprise us later in life like it did St. Paul.  Let’s not wait to be knocked onto our backs.  Today, God wants to surprise us with joy.

Lenten Blessings,

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