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## An Overflowing Joy

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021*

*John 15:9-17; Mother's Day*

The other day I was surfing facebook, which I occasionally do, and I came across this lovely video of a horse basically petting her human with her lips. This woman said she had gone out to the pasture just to spend some time with the horse, and the woman had been petting the horse's chest, and all of a sudden the horse used its big horsey lips to groom and rub the woman's head and face, in a totally clear expression of love and mutual affection. It made me smile the hugest smile, and I put the video on my facebook wall so you can go find it if you want to.

When my daughter Carly was a baby and crawling around, she was pretty introverted and didn't seem to need a whole lot of eye contact. I remember a time, though, when she was just sitting on the ground playing, and I was sitting next to her, and I must have been smiling looking at her though I wasn't conscious of it. But suddenly she looked up at my face and her entire face just lit up with joy catching each other's gaze. It was such a small but one of the most beautiful memories I have of her as an infant.

Dianne Pizey tells the story of her first trip to Haiti years ago, and regardless of whatever she expected to happen, what actually happened is that she utterly fell in love with these beautiful joyful people, so much so that she felt herself to be one with them, and has been leading our Haiti ministry in support of a local school ever since.

I could go on to tell more stories like this, but they all have something in common. It is the experience of unbidden, unexpected, spontaneous joy—the joy that comes from tender and deep connection between living creatures. Today is Mother’s Day, which is a time we honor motherhood. Although motherhood like anything else human is messy and imperfect, we know that when it is working, there is an innate and powerful connection between mother and child that manifests as an utter trust and joy and delight, and that is as good a way to capture the kind of joy I’ve been speaking about as anything else.

In today’s reading from John’s gospel, Jesus speaks about joy. It is the night he will later be betrayed and arrested, so these are his last moments with his beloved, his last chance to share his teachings and his presence with them. And in the five chapters of John that detail what he says to them – what’s sometimes called the “Farewell discourse” –over and over again, he talks about joy. That’s really surprising given that he is about to face a brutal and excruciating death, and there is so much loss ahead of them. But Jesus insists that he is giving his disciples what they need so that not only will his joy

be in them, but that their joy will be complete. Later in this time Jesus says that just as a woman in labor has anguish but forgets it all and is filled with joy the minute she meets the baby she has so longed for, so also his disciples will have pain, but when they see Jesus again they will have a joy that no one can take away from them.

So the joy that Jesus is speaking about is not just the joy of an unexpected and beautiful connection with a living creature you call beloved. It's about an *unbreakable* connection with God, with Christ, and therefore I would say with all creation. Some Eastern traditions speak about a joy that is beyond pleasure and pain—it's a deep source of internal light and warmth and love that cannot be taken from you. Clearly Jesus means this joy to be stronger even than the trauma and horror of his torture and crucifixion and death. And if you look at what happens to the disciples in those early years after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension, you will see that they are profoundly changed. They are sitting on a joy that is abundant, overflowing, that never runs out. This is the joy that Jesus means for us to have also.

This week there was a speaker at the Healing Our City Prayer Tent, a Buddhist meditation teacher named Mark Nunberg.<sup>1</sup> He talked about something I found really important. He said that for those of us in the white community who have finally begun to wake up to the extent of the harm that has been caused in so many ways, it can

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp1vm99JhVI&t=307s>

almost seem strangely inappropriate or even shameful to experience joy. But nothing could be further from the truth. If we wish truly to be people of Jesus' Way of Love, we need to be connected to a source that never runs out. That source is the vast reservoir of the love of God in Christ, that expresses itself in the joy and gratitude of connection. We need this joy, this connection, every day, and indeed I believe it is our divine birthright to have it, no matter what attachment issues we may have from our families of origin mother's day notwithstanding, or whatever isolation or relationship difficulties we may have now. Mark Nunberg said that it is essential to set aside time every day to soak in that goodness, that joy, to receive the goodness and joy in your life. For Christians, this means knowing in our bones that because of Christ, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God.

Experiencing this kind of love and joy is like a person in debt who is hoping they can talk the credit card company into a payment plan that is more extended, and then winning the lottery instead. It's moving from trying to hang on to this small glass of water you have when right behind you is an entire and vast river you can jump into and never run out of. This love, this joy is abundant, overflowing, so vast it cannot ever run out.

There is nothing that healing cannot touch.

There is no isolation that God cannot transcend.

There is no commission of violence that can fully quench the spark of God's image in a soul.

There is no evil that is beyond the scope and reach of God's love. There will never be an end to the vast reservoir of the love and life of God. This is cause for joy.

Daily connection with the love of God in Christ, with the joy that comes from experiencing this love, is what will help us stay in the discomfort and struggle and weariness of addressing the wrongs there are in the world. And sometimes that daily connection with the love of God comes from expressing it to someone else, from being generous to another. Pouring yourself out in the full goodness of who you are can open you up to receiving the flow of God's love, and allow you to step out of the puddle and into the river.

So what gives you joy? For those of us who have spent a lot of time feeling guilty in life, what if you could stop feeling it is inappropriate to experience joy and make space for it instead? What if you could keep touching the wellspring of joy that comes from real connection with God and other living beings? I believe the Spirit is inviting us, each day, to put down our burdens, acknowledge that we alone cannot fix the world, and for a time, just be human beings who know ourselves to come from original goodness, original blessing.

From that place, we will naturally love one another. We will abide in the love of God. Even when we pick our burdens back up, and start checking items off our to-do list and doing the harder work of learning and repenting and committing to do no harm, we will know we have not ever left the love of God. The love of God who is

Mother as well as Father holds us all in the everlasting delight of connection. May you experience that joy deeply, every day. May you touch the wellspring of that goodness and let it nourish you to follow Jesus' Way of Love. Amen.