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November 17, 2019

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Isaiah 12

Luke 21: 5-19

Delight in My People!

God says, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people." (Isaiah 65: 19a)

To delight in people; what a radical concept!

Poet and author Ross Gay has documented his delight in people and other things in a book of essayettes, *The Book of Delights*, which he compiled, hand-written, for one year, from birthday to birthday, as a discipline of observation.

Says Ross, "It didn't take me long to learn that the discipline or practice of writing these essays occasioned a kind of delight radar.

Or maybe it was more like the development of a delight muscle.

Something that implies that the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study.

A month or two into this project, delights were calling to me: *Write about me!*

Write about me! Because it is rude not to acknowledge your delights..."

(Ross, p. xii)

Let me give you an example of Ross's observations.

"Today I was waved at twice, and so delighted, by people I didn't know," he says.

"It was the sort of placid, warm wave of unfamiliar that I learned from my grampa,

riding the country roads outside of Verdale, MN, population 559,
where to the driver of every passing truck or car he raised his first two fingers
to the stiff brim of his ball cap and cut them through the air
like the gentlest initiation of a curve ball ever.

It was an elegant wave, understated, that intimated an older time of
hat-tipping and such. Of hats and such. An older time of neighborliness,
which is actually the present time, too,
evidenced by my two unfamiliar waves." (Ross, p. 193)

After I read this essay, I started waving at everyone, too, even those
on the road whom I pass, or who let me merge into their lane,
or even at those who tick me off in traffic. Hi!

In another essay Ross says, "I adore it when I see two people...
sharing the burden of a shopping bag or sack of laundry
by each gripping one of the handles.

It at first seems to encourage a kind of staggering, as the uninitiated,
or the impatient, will try to walk at his own pace, the bag twisting
this way and that, whacking shins or skidding along the ground.

But as we mostly do, feeling the sack, which has become a kind of tether between us,
we modulate our pace, even our sway and saunter – the good and sole rhythms
we might swear we live by – to the one on the other side of the sack.

I suppose part of why I so adore the sack sharing is because most often

this is a burden one or the other could manage just fine solo –
which make it different from dragging Granny's armoire up two flights of steps, say,

or wrestling free a truck stuck hip-deep in a snow bank.

Yes, it's the lack of necessity of this act that's perhaps precisely why it delights me so.

Everything that needs doing – getting groceries or laundry home –

would get done just fine without this meager collaboration.

But the only thing that needs doing, without it, would not," says Gay. (Gay, p. 72-73)

I have noticed a great deal of burden-sharing lately in our congregation,

as you, the people of God, have been sharing the laundry bag of grief

with those who mourn, which I find a delightful thing to witness.

"This is the day the Lord, has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,"

the Psalmist urges us. (Psalm 118: 24)

What if the Lord also wants us to rejoice and delight not only in the day,

but in the people God brings into our life on any given day as well?

The speaker in today's passage from Isaiah is Yahweh God, who speaks glorious things

to a people who have been walking in the darkness of exile and death;

who have been living each day in the valley of the shadows.

To people whose cup overflows with nothing but tears, Yahweh now proclaims,

no more tears of loss or lament;

no more babies who die in their mothers' arms;

no more grandpas who do not live to see their grandkids;

no more boarded up homes, no more blighted neighborhoods;

no more gardens gone to seed, harvests unreaped;

no more work done in vain, time down the drain;

no more calamity downstream for our children to navigate.

For Yahweh is in a creative mood, overlooking former things amiss,

in order to create, create, and re-create, new heavens and a new earth,
where "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together,

the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and the serpent shall not longer threaten.

They shall not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain! " says the Lord,

the Creator, the Dreamer, the Re-Creator, and the Chief Rejoicer. (v. 25)

It certainly is a hopeful message that we need to hear today, isn't it?

This visionary is Yahweh God, who back-dreams an earlier creation called Eden,

but now revisions that bucolic utopia as a cityscape, a new Jerusalem,

where peace will prevail,

where good tidings will lift up the grieving, despairing and downtrodden,

and where God will rejoice in the city, and take delight in God's people.

Or as another visionary, Julian of Norwich, once stated, where

"all will be well and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

(Norwich, Julian, *Showings*, Paulist Press, 1978)

Another later visionary will repurpose this same dream

when believers are suffering again, this time from persecution by the Romans,

yearning again for new creation, redemption and restoration.

John of Patmos will write in the book of *Revelation*,

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;

for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,

and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21: 1-2)

And in John's revision, God will dwell with God's people, and be with them and be their God, wiping every tear from their eyes.

For there will be no more death, or mourning, or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away. (Rev. 21: 3-4)

The two visions are certainly similar in their depiction of utterly renewed creation, where former painful distortions cease to be, and where the promise prevails of the compassionate and comforting nearness of God once more.

But John's vision omits what intrigues me about God's kingdom vision in Isaiah:

that God delights in God's people!

That's the part of the original vision that grabs me that moves me profoundly:

that God delights in God's people!

It makes me want to activate my delight radar and flex my delight muscle, and notice what delights me Sunday after Sunday in this sanctuary:

I take delight that most of you sit in the same place every Sunday,

so I am able to tell who's here, and who's not, quite easily;

the wrap-around sound of the choir behind me and the congregation before me,

is stunning and is something I will truly miss when I am gone;

acolytes and crucifers who are outgrowing their robes is great to see,

as are high-tops and sandals peeking out from under choir robes;

the congregation streaming forward to partake of holy communion gives me chills,

as it reminds me of the Great Banquet, that Great Fiesta of God;
I delight in watching Sue Fricks express her silent applause with her fingers,
and in babies cooing at the colors in the windows, and clapping at the sound of singing;
the teenagers in the balcony who lean towards their friends with affection give me joy,
(there has always been a lot of leaning going on in the balcony, parents!);
the Rist boys who used to play with their mother's hair during worship
was so sweet.

And Horst Meyer, I recall, was the epitome of enthusiastically delighting in everything:
his wife, Ruth Mary, beautiful music, tomatoes, strawberries, Duke Gardens,
ducks, breads, and people,
although by all reasoning he should have been the epitome of bitterness,
since the Nazis were responsible for the deaths of both of his parents.
Delight can be paradoxical, in that way, in that the ones least likely to express delight
are often its greatest ambassadors.

Two synonymous Hebrew verbs are voiced in Isaiah 65: 19.

The first, *vegalti*, means "to rejoice", as God does over the new Jerusalem.
And the second, *vesasti*, means "to delight", as with an enticing call,
as God does over God's people.

In other words, "to delight" means to express verbal elation, like Woot! or Woo-hoo!,
or as my little green parrot used to squawk when we entered through the door,
"Woo, Kiwi, woo!"

God delights in God's people as with a shout, with a cheer, with verbal acclamation,
in this vision of the heavenly/earthly peaceable kingdom.

What would it mean, I wonder, if we likewise find delight in the people around us,
as a practice of spiritual discipline?

Would the peaceable kingdom of God be made manifest?

Of course, not everyone in our lives is delightful to us;

not everyone elicits a shout of acclamation from our lips; and herein lies the rub.

For example, when I used to work for a pediatrician in Charlotte,

there was this one man named Allen, who regularly brought his children

to see Dr. Walker, but whom I found particularly annoying.

You see, Allen happened to have seven children by seven different women,

and each time he would bring them in, which was frequently and often,

he would smile and chat us up, but in the end,

only pay the doctor \$1 for his services.

He really got under my skin. And I had to have my own little "come to Jesus meeting"

to try and move beyond my personal irritation and exasperation,

in order to find some reasons to take delight in Allen.

Well, he did love his children and was very proud of each of them.

Allen also seemed to get along amazingly well with all of their mothers.

And he did see to his children's care, bringing them in for check-ups and immunizations,

as well as for sick visits. And he did at least make an effort to pay for those.

I did delight in that Allen was quite a character! That I could honestly say.

But let me turn to Jesus, who seems to have had no trouble

in delighting in God's people, which perhaps is our greatest hint

that he is someone quite supernatural.

Jesus seems to take equal delight in tree-climbers and social drop-outs,
in untouchables and cling-ons, in doubters and in debtors,
in sinners and saints, in compulsives and contemplatives.

I am reminded of a particular interaction of Jesus with Simon Peter
in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus asks him, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

To which Simon Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

And Jesus responds, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will
build my church...and I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven;
whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16: 15-19)

And I wonder, if delighting in God's people, finding delight in each one of God's people,
and especially delighting in God's people whom we find difficult to love,
is one of those keys of the kingdom, that shakes loose and unbinds
the pinnings of God's new heaven and new earth?

It's a little like loving one's enemies and persecutors, isn't it? (Matt. 5: 44)

Says South African Anglican cleric and human rights activist Desmond Tutu,

"Dear Child of God, before we can become

God's partners, we must know what God wants for us.

'I have a dream,' God says, 'Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world
whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility,

its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony
are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be
more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be
justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing.

I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares
and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they
are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family."

(Tutu, Desmond. *God's Dream*, p. 19-20)

Perhaps something as simple as delighting in God's people, one by one,
makes us partners in God's dream, helping to bring that dream to fruition.

For as the church proclaims in Justo Gonzalez' beautiful *Hispanic Creed*:

We believe in the Reign of God – the day of the Great Fiesta!

When all the colors of creation will form a harmonious rainbow,

When all the people will join in the joyful banquet,

When all the tongues of the universe will sing the same song.

And because we believe, we commit ourselves:

to believe for those cannot believe,

to love for those who do not love,

to dream for those who do not dream,

until the day when hope becomes a reality.

In the name of God, the Rejoicer, Christ, the Delighter, and the Holy Spirit,
the Dream-Inspirer. Amen.

