

Finding Joy in an Unjust World: Practicing Deep Joy in Youth Ministry

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Abstract:

Deep joy is joy that must acknowledge, and cannot ignore, the reality of injustice and suffering in the world. In this paper, I explore the notion of deep joy through the lens of existential joy in Ecclesiastes and eschatological joy in Paul's letters, suggesting the Eucharist as a practice in which they hold together. By dealing with suffering in two different ways, these two theologies of joy complement each other and together provide a deeper understanding of joy in the Christian life, particularly as it relates to adolescent faith formation.

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One of the main themes in the Disney Pixar film *Inside Out* is the embodied character Joy learning to recognize and value the role that her colleague Sadness plays in the life of Riley, the eleven-year-old girl whose emotional control center they occupy. Joy has always attempted to restrain, silence, ignore, or fix Sadness, but she gradually comes to see that she cannot exist without Sadness. In one particularly poignant scene, Riley’s imaginary friend Bing Bong begins to cry because Riley has forgotten him. Joy feels very uncomfortable and immediately responds, “Hey, it’s gonna be ok! We can fix this!” When Bing Bong fails to cheer up immediately, Joy tries to tickle him, to make silly faces, anything to avoid his grief. But Sadness sits down beside Bing Bong and begins to cry with him – and ultimately, Sadness brings Bing Bong more joy than Joy can. Joy learns that she cannot ignore, shut up, or bypass Sadness; that in fact, Sadness plays an integral role in the experience of Joy.¹

The things that we do to distract ourselves from grief by imitating joy – drinking to forget, impulsive shopping, Netflix binging, one-night stands - these self-medicating actions are only a shallow approximation of joy, or counterfeit joys, because they attempt to side-step, rather than enter into, the pain and grief of life. But the concept of joy connotes something beyond merely existing or surviving. Joy carries with it the connotation of living fully – and in order to live fully, we have to live into our pain. Karl Barth writes, “[Joy]...is an intensification, strengthening, deepening, and elevation of the whole awareness of life which as such is necessarily more than joy” – with the implication that joy also opens us to grief.² Young people are particularly prone to self-medication because they are newly learning how to cope with the injustice of the world, and they learn from the example of adults who are just trying to make it through life. If we are to help young people have a healthy spiritual life, they need to understand

¹ *Inside Out*, directed by Pete Docter and Ronnie del Carmen (Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, 2015).

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/4, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 382.

joy as something that does not shy away from sorrow, but rather embraces it. This is what I call deep joy.

Within Scripture, there is more than one model for the way that joy interacts with suffering. This paper examines two, which I will call existential joy and eschatological joy. My area of study is in the intersection of wisdom literature and youth ministry, and so the first iteration of this paper focused exclusively on the nature of existential joy in Ecclesiastes and its relation to youth ministry. It was theological, certainly, but as I continued to work with these ideas, I began to wonder if it was a sufficient theology for a specifically Christian youth ministry. Thus, this paper was born: an attempt to treat, however briefly, both parts of the canon in a discussion of joy and youth ministry, to explore how they complement and nuance each other, and to see if together they could give us a fuller, deeper, and more robust understanding of joy.

Existential Joy

Ecclesiastes is unlikely to be the first biblical text to which one turns to find a theology of joy, as it has historically been better known for its cynicism. It was admitted to the canon only with reluctance, and later described by theologian Gerhard von Rad as “suspended over the abyss of despair,” a “bitter sceptical marginal note on the tradition of the wise men.”³ Ecclesiastes is also not the go-to text for fun, culturally relevant youth ministry inspiration, as its cynicism seems to contradict the hopefulness and possibility of youth. Inspirational graduation speeches encourage young people that they are one-of-a-kind, that they can do anything to which they set their minds, that they can change the world. Ecclesiastes says nothing of the sort; instead, it reminds them that life is not fair, hard work guarantees nothing, and while generations come and go, there is nothing new under the sun. Thus, it seems counter-intuitive to look to Ecclesiastes

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* vol. 1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, with a new introduction by Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 455-9.

for a theology of joy for young people, but I believe that Qohelet does offer young people a surprisingly robust one. Qohelet is certainly no optimist, but neither is he a pessimist; Eunny P. Lee appropriately characterizes his outlook on life as “faithful realism” which takes seriously both the “tragic and joyous dimensions” of life.⁴ He does not shy away from naming the difficult realities of life, the “grievous ills” which he has seen: exhausting and unceasing toil (2:22-23), entire fortunes lost (5:13-14), the tears of the oppressed under the power of their oppressors (4:1), that the wise and the fool share the same fate (2:14-17). The injustices and futilities of which Qohelet speaks resonate with the world adolescents know: a world of senseless violence, systemic racism and oppression, poverty, cyber bullying, self-harm, and more.

In light of life’s senselessness, Qohelet, in the voice of King Solomon, set out to discover “what was good for mortals to do” (2:3, NRSV). Drawing on the genre of the royal autobiography, designed to “memorialize [the king’s] achievements forever,” he recounts all of his grand accomplishments, all that he accumulated, and all the ways in which he tried to find meaning in life – only to flip the genre upside down, concluding at the end of his impressive list that “all was vanity, and a chasing after the wind” (2:11).⁵ Having considered how one ought to live, and finding that grasping at success was also meaningless, Qohelet suggests an alternate way of being in the world, one which is reiterated several times throughout the book: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil...[this is] from the hand of God” (2:24). It becomes a refrain throughout the book; in each one, Qohelet invites the reader to find joy in response to another of life’s absurdities. Beginning with this first passage, each subsequent passage builds upon the one before it, becoming increasingly emphatic,

⁴ Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric* (New York: DeGruyter, 2005), 8.

⁵ C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 144.

even urgent, building to a climactic passage full of imperatives: “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart...Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the [partner] whom you love...” (9:7-9).

Qohelet’s earlier admonitions to “eat and drink” take on new life, as he emphasizes that these things should be done in celebration (with “enjoyment” and a “merry heart”), and as “eating and drinking” expand into other avenues of joy.⁶ For Qohelet, the only response to the world’s absurdities is to receive and enjoy the gifts of God.

For Qohelet, joy is not an abstract philosophical concept. It is embodied; it comes from the physical pleasures of life. At first blush, this may seem disappointingly simplistic, somehow unsacred or theologically underdeveloped. But humans are embodied creatures – even God is embodied in the person of Jesus – and our physical bodies are good and holy. To live fully into that humanity, experiencing joy in the gifts of God, is good. In Qohelet’s theology of joy, something as simple as a glass of wine – or, for the teens in my youth group, a Starbucks Frappuccino – can be a tangible reminder of God’s grace. In her book *Practicing Passion*, Kenda Dean notes that tangible, concrete spiritual practices are particularly helpful for young people, who are transitioning between concrete and formal operational thought.⁷ Of adolescents’ “desire to feel their bodies” and the importance of concretizing spirituality, she writes, “We experience the world first through our bodies. Before we can mentally grasp an object, we grasp it with our hands; before we mouth words, we mouth objects...Any theology that takes passion seriously requires embodiment.”⁸ If we desire to instill a theology of joy in young people, we must

⁶ Cf. Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, 64; R.N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 23 (1982), 87-88.

⁷ Kenda Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 241.

⁸ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 121.

approach it physically, as Qohelet does, rather than philosophically. It is not enough for young people to know about joy; they need to *feel* joy.

Eschatological Joy

In the letters of Paul, we find a very different sort of joy in response to suffering. The physicality of existential joy gives way to the spirituality of eschatological joy; its temporal location is not the present moment, but an orientation toward a future hope. As Barth writes, “Our joy always has its proper seat in anticipatory joy...it must point away beyond itself.”⁹ For Qohelet, joy and sorrow are compartmentalized spheres of the same reality. For the persecuted Christians of the first century, the joy of future hope bursts in on the sorrow of the present; the promise of the world to come is superimposed onto, and transforms, the world that is. This is what is often called proleptic eschatology, or inaugurated eschatology: Christ inaugurated a new reality that has not yet reached its fulfillment, but the coming of Christ gives us a foretaste of what is to come, and the promise of what is to come changes everything.

N.T. Wright explains the heart of inaugurated eschatology in a simple but powerful declaration: “*Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not.*”¹⁰ In the gospel, everything is turned upside down. The first are last, and the last are first. No power is ultimate except the One who eschewed earthly power, who was crucified, who stands in solidarity with the marginalized. Even death has no hold on us. Thus, even while we keenly feel the pain of injustice, we know that it will not have the last word; it is shown to be a sham, and its power is broken. Because we know the end of the story, the hardships in the middle are made bearable. This is why Paul can so confidently assert, “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be

⁹ Barth, *CD III/4*, 384.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, “Joy: Some New Testament Perspectives and Questions,” *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 52, italics original.

revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). This is why, while in prison, he can pray with joy (Phil. 1:4), rejoice that the Gospel is preached (1:18), and exhort others to rejoice as well (4:4). As Wright points out, “I believe it is no coincidence that Philippians, as well as being the most explicit letter when it comes to joy, is also the most explicit when it comes to the sovereign lordship of Jesus”¹¹ – because the lordship of Jesus, exposing the “emperor’s new clothes,” so to speak, is the basis for Christian joy in the face of suffering.

Eschatology, and the resulting joy that breaks in on our sorrow, forms the backbone of the New Testament in the belief that, because of the resurrection of Christ, *everything is different*. As such, it is an important theology to teach our young people, and fortunately, we do not have to use the word “proleptic” to do so. We can teach it by reading Philippians and asking, “What in the world does Paul have to be joyful about in jail?” We can teach it through hymnody – the black gospel tradition is full of eschatological joy, unencumbered by academic language: “This joy that I have, the world didn’t give it to me. The world didn’t give it, and the world can’t take it away.”¹² Or, “I still have joy, I still have joy. After all the things I’ve been through, I still have joy.”¹³ We can teach it by juxtaposing lament with praise, as do many of the Psalms, and as Paul does in Romans 8, as a way to acknowledge the suffering and yet still proclaim our faith that God is making all things new.

Particularly for young people, a robust theology of eschatological hope is grounding. Adolescence is a time of learning to cope with the harsh realities of the world, accompanied by what feels like an emotional rollercoaster. The older we get, the faster time seems to pass; but because young people do not yet have the perspective of time, everything feels ultimate, and

¹¹ Wright, “Joy,” 51-52.

¹² Shirley Caesar, “This Joy I Have,” *Higher Ground* (Blue Note Records, 2005).

¹³ Dorothy Norwood, “I Still Have Joy,” *Better Days Ahead* (Malaco Records, 1993).

every present emotion is their entire world. The first love is the only love. The first rejection is so devastating because it is so all-encompassing. The first F on a math test may actually feel like they can never come back from it – to say nothing of the far more pressing adult concerns that weigh on many teenagers. What if my parents kick me out when I come out? If I get pulled over, will my name be the next trending hashtag? Young people also strongly feel the desire for autonomy, yet they have little say in anything that happens to them. Rather than giving them opportunities to make important decisions or participate in society in a meaningful way, we restrict their agency to decisions of style and consumerism - decisions that we perceive do not matter.¹⁴ For all of these reasons, adolescence can feel incredibly claustrophobic. To stay grounded, young people need to feel connected to something larger than themselves. In the midst of a tumultuous sea of emotions, eschatological hope is a reminder that *this is not all there is*. There is something beyond the present moment than can nonetheless speak hope into, and redeem, the present moment. Because this joy is not circumstantial – because it is rooted in an unchangeable event – it helps young people themselves to be rooted and grounded in the midst of life’s uncertainty.

Putting it All Together

These two approaches to joy are vastly different. They both recognize the injustice and suffering of the world, and they are both committed to telling the truth about the world. But one tells the truth about the world the way it is; the other tells the truth about the world as it *could be*, as it *will be* – or, one might even say, the way it *really is* on the spiritual plane.¹⁵ One seeks to live in the present moment, while the other draws its strength from the promise of the future. One

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), esp. pp. 8, 15; Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).

¹⁵ I am indebted to my spouse, John Paul Cooke, for this insight.

locates itself in the physical world, while the other is rooted in a spiritual hope. One focuses on the good inherent in the world, finding contentment in its lot, while the other longs for the redemption of a world that is broken. One receives joy that is given, while the other actively chooses it, even hangs on tenaciously. Is there any meaningful way in which these two very different theologies of joy can come together?

The answer, I believe, is not in their harmonization, but in their tension. Where might one fill in the gaps left by the other? How can they inform, complement, even critique one another, to give us a fuller understanding of joy in the face of life's injustice? Much of our faith is expressed in opposites which are brought into sharp relief by the juxtaposition of these two theologies of joy. We are in the world, but not of the world. Creation is good, but creation is broken. These two theologies of joy can pull each other into balance, ensuring that our theology does not become warped or distorted in either direction.

For example, as many scholars have argued, Paul believed that Jesus would return very soon, which substantially changed the way he lived. As Colleen Shantz notes, "Because he believes that God will soon intervene, Paul can exhort those in slavery to live as if they were freed persons of the Lord (1 Cor 7:22) and exhort those who are married to live as if they had no spouse because 'the appointed time has grown very short' (1 Cor 7:29)."¹⁶ Paul had tunnel vision for Christ's return, and although Christians continue to live in its anticipation, the delay of the Parousia means that we live differently than Paul did. We plan for the future. We go to school, we get married and have children, we save for retirement. In light of this tension, what does a meaningful life look like? How do we live day-to-day with the expectation that we may die

¹⁶ Colleen Shantz, "I Have Learned to Be Content': Happiness According to St. Paul," *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 199.

before Christ returns? Perhaps the theology of joy and flourishing found in Ecclesiastes can provide a model. Yet at the same time, as we have already seen, this does not give us license to live selfishly with no regard for anything but our own pleasure. Instead, the experience of existential joy should lead us back toward a longing for eschatological fulfillment, because the moments of joy that we experience in this world also highlight the deep sorrows and injustices of life. The things we enjoy are not enjoyed by everyone, and in fact, someone else may have had to suffer to produce them. We know, too, that everything in which we delight comes to an end. The flowers we pick to enjoy will soon wither and die. The fortune we enjoy, which is here today, may be gone tomorrow. Even our very lives, and the lives of those we love, are like a puff of smoke. And the knowledge of joy's fleetingness leaves us longing for more. We sense innately that it is good, and that it should be this way always. As Nietzsche is often quoted, "Joy wants eternity; wants deep, wants deep eternity."¹⁷

Together, these two theologies of joy ensure that we live in the tension of life's goodness and joys, and life's incompleteness and deep wounds; that we become neither hedonists on the one hand, selfishly indulging our appetites for pleasure, or escapists on the other hand, who are so focused on future redemption that we disengage from life and excuse ourselves from the hard work of justice. Justin E. Crisp says it well: "Joy is neither an ideological opiate serving to placate and pacify the dispossessed, nor a sentiment as fragile as garden-variety happiness."¹⁸ Together, these two theologies of joy root us firmly in the present moment while also reminding us that the present is transformed by the resurrection of Christ. They enable us to receive the gifts

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 264.

¹⁸ Justin E. Crisp, "Introduction: A Bright Sorrow," *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xviii.

of God with gratitude, while also inviting us to long for redemption. They help us lament injustice, while also giving us hope to carry on.

Practicing Deep Joy: The Eucharist

What does all of this conceptual theology mean practically for youth ministry? Where does the present meet the future? Where do the physical and the spiritual collide? Where do suffering and joy come together in a single practice? All of these converge in the practice of the Eucharist. Wright notes in a discussion of Paul's theology of joy-in-suffering, "Paul was no hedonist, but...he believed...that food and drink were good and to be enjoyed...Christian meals, not least but not only the Eucharist, constituted a central part of what he meant by *celebrate, rejoice*."¹⁹ Joy meets suffering as bread and wine – elements of feasting and gladness – meet the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. The physical meets the spiritual as real bread and real wine meet the mystical presence of Christ. Like the child who participates in Passover and is expected to ask its meaning (Ex 12:26; Deut 6:20), young people encounter and are shaped by the physicality of communion before fully understanding its theology. The present meets the future as Christians in all times and places are united by their participation in the sacrament, and as we experience in the Eucharist a foretaste of what is to come.

The practice of Eucharist in most of our churches today, however, has little in common with the shared meals of first-century Christians. It is more solemn than joyful and celebratory, more individualistic than communal. It becomes, in the words of teens in my youth group, "stiff" and "formal," like the rest of the worship service. In contrast, youth ministers know the power of a meal to bring people together. The youth ministry stereotype of "pizza and games" exists for a reason: conversation and fellowship happen over a meal, at a table, in a way that they cannot in

¹⁹ Wright, "Joy," 57.

rows of straight-backed chairs. Sleep-deprived high schoolers are far more likely to participate in Sunday morning discussion if they have had breakfast. Yet there is also truth to the stereotype of youth ministry being shallow; we provide the food and fun, but often there is little intentionality given it, and certainly no theological reflection on the pizza besides the perfunctory blessing. But what might happen if we took the best of both – the bread and wine from the assembly, the food and celebration from youth ministry – and turned youth group pizza and games into something deeper: a joyful, celebratory Eucharistic meal?

When I was a college-aged youth ministry intern, the youth minister I worked for gave me freedom to experiment and do exactly that: we held a youth group communion meal.²⁰ Gathering in the living room of a host, thirty of us ate pasta as well as bread, drank water and soda as well as grape juice, and turned communion from a five-minute meditation into a two-hour meal. We began by talking about the meaning of Eucharist – thanksgiving – and sharing things for which we were thankful. Youth group students served their peers, saying to each one in turn, “The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you.” As we continued to eat and drink, we read the Gospel account of the Last Supper. Over dessert, we remembered loved ones who were no longer with us, sharing their names with one another, and talked about the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. We ate and drank together, we prayed together, laughed together, and cried together. Through the celebration of the Eucharist we acknowledged grief and embraced joy, enjoyed the physical and experienced the spiritual, lived in the present and looked to the future.

²⁰ I am indebted the ideas of theologian John Mark Hicks. While some of his practical suggestions can be found in his book *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2002), I also had the opportunity to participate in a Eucharistic meal which he hosted, and after which I patterned this youth group meal.

There is a myriad of ways in which the Eucharistic meal can be varied. Set the table differently; serve different food; ask different questions; tell different stories; sing different songs. In the familiar and unifying element of bread and wine, the Eucharist gives us a concrete practice within which to frame theological discussion. If youth ministry can reclaim the practice of Eucharist as table fellowship, it gives us a robust practice of deep joy – one that makes space for grief and doubt as well as excitement and enthusiasm. Pulling together the simple enjoyment of physical gifts in the present moment, and the forward-looking hope of Christ’s resurrection, Eucharist unites both parts of our canon, both parts of our tradition, into one uniquely Christian practice of deep joy.

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