

Last Sunday I went to hear Dolly Parton at the Santa Barbara Bowl. I was amazed and enthralled by her ability to hold thousands of people spell-bound as she talked about her family and her friends, sang old songs and new, and cracked jokes for hours... I want to be like her when I'm 70.

What struck me most about Dolly was her joy. Her laugh seems to erupt irrepressibly out of her, as though she has a great store of joy that just bubbles up. It reminded me most of the videos I've seen of the Dalai Lama. Both Dolly and the Dalai have had lives with great hardship as well as good times. Both of them base their lives in faith, though of very different kinds, and both are filled with joy.

Joy seems to have been in short supply in my own life this last month or so. I think partly it's the ongoing environmental crisis, and partly it's sadness that we have elected a candidate for President who thinks that climate change is a hoax and says he'll cancel the Paris climate agreement. I find it difficult to stay connected with joy when everything seems so serious.

A few weeks ago I said that a faith like our own which has the pain of the crucifixion at the center of its narrative must have something important to say to a world in pain. Today I want to echo that by saying that a faith which has the joy and the hope of the resurrection at its core must surely have words of joy and hope for a beleaguered world today.

Our hope is in Christ who makes all things new. We are called, like St Francis who we are celebrating today, to live in a counter-cultural way. St Francis did it by becoming a beggar and preaching to the poor and the birds and animals. Although we are not called to live it out in such an extreme way, we are called to live in the same kind of dependence upon God. We are called to find our hope and our joy not in the things of this world which are always changing but in the steadfast love of God.

That's a very Biblical word, isn't it – *steadfast*. How many times have you used *steadfast* in ordinary conversation this week? Yet it describes God's love perfectly. God's love is both steady and fast. The fast does not mean quick but like fastener – binding two things together. We might say "they became *fast* friends." God's love is both tight and steady. It is totally reliable. And it is love for us as individuals, not just as a species. We can see that in Jesus' life – how he called disciples by name, and healed people one by one.

Our hope is in God's steadfast love.

On the front of your Benediction Weekly you'll see a poem by the Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Stafford. It's called the Gates of Hope

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope –
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,

Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna’ be all right.”
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first of all and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.

We Christians have double vision. We see the world as it is – a place where 50 million people are refugees, where forests and orangutans are being destroyed to grow palm oil, where every month sees new record temperatures. But we also see signs of hope, in fact we search for signs of hope, signs of God’s work. We see the countries of the world signing on to a climate agreement; the first agreement ever made between so many countries. We see the hope of alternative energy, and of forests and rivers being restored.

And even more importantly, we see God’s love expressed every time someone stands up for justice for the earth and its people. And we see the joy – the joy that the redemption of creation is being worked out. That God’s purposes are being fulfilled. That Christ is all in all.

Yes we see the struggle, many of us struggle personally with health, family or financial issues – we all struggle with the bigger questions of life together on earth. But let us also see the joy of the struggle. That may be the great gift that Dolly and the Dalai Lama bring us – an ability to see the joy *in* the struggle. For there *is* joy. Jesus once said, “you are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” (Matt 5:13) We might change that to “you are the joy of the earth, but if the church loses its joy, how can it be made joyful again?”

Fortunately, that has an easier answer than the one about salt – we can be made joyful again by realizing all that has been done for us in Christ Jesus, and claiming the joy of God as our heritage.

In today’s gospel we heard the strengthening words of Jesus,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

St. Francis heard the call to let go of all the struggles which come with having homes, families, possessions, and became a wandering beggar. We are *not* called to do the same, but we *are* offered the opportunity to let go of all that we are carrying and give it to God. I am sure that Francis was a joyful man because he was a holy man.

Joy does not depend on outer circumstances. It depends entirely upon our inner path. Joy wells up inside us when we are letting God take our heavy burdens and living in the moment.

As we age, it seems that for most of us the struggles weigh us down internally just as gravity pulls us down externally. Along with sagging flesh comes a heaviness inside. Why do we live life as if it is a burden rather than a joy? Why do we insist on thinking it's all up to us when in fact God is right there offering to carry our heavy burdens?

Jesus says, "Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart." This is where the secret lies. Being humble means knowing that it doesn't all depend on us. Yes we have our part to play but ultimately it depends on God, and God has already redeemed the world.

The resurrection has happened. Christ has completed the work that was begun in creation, but just as creation is continuing, so redemption is continuing.

Our task is to give our heaviness to God and choose to see joy. Then we can take our place in the Gates of Hope with our double vision,

The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.