

March 22, 2020
Rev Jane Florence
Message “Mental Immunity Challenge”
Philippians 4: 4-9



If you follow our facebook or get our email, you know that I've abruptly changed our worship theme. I've set aside the Politics of Jesus that I had prepared for Lent and decided instead that what we need right now is JOY!, so I reached for my copy of The Book of Joy by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It wasn't a far reach. It sits on my devotional table. Just picking up the book and opening it brings me joy. It was a gift, so it has special meaning. The youth group at my former church gave it to me at my farewell. It has their pictures glued in it. They wrote things they heard me say over and over, (Today is a gift from God! You are beloved and sacred!) and their wishes and memories of my eleven years watching them grow up. What a joy! In addition to its sentimental value, it is written collaborating the wisdom of two men I greatly admire.

I attended a lecture given by Archbishop Tutu many years ago. I joined several thousand new friends in an auditorium one evening. Even from several levels of seating above the stage, the first thing I noticed about him- was his smile. A small man entered the room, waved and greeted us with a smile and a giggle that electrified the room and joyful energy bounced off the walls. I marveled at his smile and the twinkle in his eyes visible even from afar. I had read his previous book on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission- (Without Forgiveness There Is No Future) which detailed the atrocities he witnessed which no human ought to endure: the innocent children shot in the back while playing in their yard, the masses slaughtered, the women tortured; the people 'disappeared' into the hands of a mob. He heard the testimony of the bloody violations committed against the black population of his country. He has fought cancer, and he stood before us beaming genuine joy.

The Dalai Lama was born to a farming family in a small hamlet in northeastern Tibet. At two yrs old, he was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous 13th Dalai Lama and taken from parents to live in opulent isolation as future spiritual and political leader of Tibet. His Holiness began his monastic education at the age of six. The curriculum included logic, fine arts, Sanskrit grammar, and medicine, but the greatest emphasis was given to Buddhist philosophy. At six, and you who may be homeschooling a 6 year old thought you had a challenge this week? You weren't even trying to explain: Abidharma, metaphysics; and Pramana, logic and epistemology. At fifteen years old, he became ruler of six million people facing war with China. When no other options remained, he escaped into the night - disguised, without glasses nearly blind, walking through sand storms, snowstorms, summiting 19,000 foot peaks during 3-week escape into exile where he and his people have lived since 1959.

These two men have plenty of reason to feel anger, bitterness, resentment and despair. Instead it's almost impossible to find a picture of them not smiling. "The Archbishop has never claimed sainthood and the Dalai lama considers himself a simple monk. They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil in the midst of which they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, of joy that" can inspire us. The men speak of joy and happiness and generosity during the first part of the book, but I am going to jump us to the second part where they begin to address the "obstacles to

joy” as we face some of our own obstacles these days. I found it interesting that in this chapter that the two begin to show some different nuances in perspectives.

When their interviewer entered into dialogue as to how to discover joy in the face of suffering, the Dalai Lama reiterated his main theme: suffering is inevitable, how we respond to the suffering is our choice. So much of our happiness originates within our own mind and heart- in how **we react to** the events in our life. The Dalai Lama encourages what he calls “mental immunity.” Mental immunity is learning to avoid the destructive emotions that can overwhelm us if left unchecked and to develop the positive ones. Immunity is about strengthening a preventative measure. It creates healthy disposition of the mind so it will be less susceptible to negative thoughts and feelings. If your mental health is good, then small disturbances will bring some distress but you will quickly recover. The book was written three years ago, but he gives an analogy that seems quite apropos these days. He says “think about it this way, if your health is strong, when viruses come they will not make you sick. If your overall health is weak even a small viruses can be very dangerous for you.” He also confided that developing mental immunity takes time; it takes practice; that is meditation. The Dali Lama teaches to train the mind, for suffering is inevitable; it is how we approach the suffering that makes the difference.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu politely offered a “yes, your teachings are true as always, but” at this point in the interview. He interjected this teaching is true, *but* it can also lead people to be annoyed with themselves unnecessarily- when they have thoughts and feelings that are really quite natural. We have to accept ourselves as we are and then hope to grow. These are things that you can train, you can change, but we ought not to be ashamed of ourselves. We are human and it is good to recognize that we have emotions.” Desmond Tutu overflows with grace and did not want people to add extra suffering in those times when negative or destructive emotions do surface.

While these two might appear to disagree at first, it seems that they both offer us good advice and perspective. It is teachings that we are hearing over and over in the world today. We can read these truths in the inspirational quotes on facebook , in meditation guides, from our mental health professionals. The truth is there is suffering and how we approach the suffering will make a huge difference as to the amount of pain, anxiety and distress we feel

There is suffering in the world; we are in a pandemic. There is no argument about that. People are sick and many are dying, but what is transmitted even more quickly than the virus is the fear of it. It is easy to get caught up in the flood of worry- legitimate worries. People face unemployment. We might be able to shop on line and have food delivered, but will we have money to do so? Will we have money to pay rent and mortgage? Will people continue to donate to the church? Will social distancing become the new normal, like after 9/11 some things never went back to the way they were before. Remember when people used to see you off at the gate and no one took their shoes off? Will people gather in large crowds again? Will everything now all be virtual? I image telling my granddaughter, yeah, we used to go into big conference centers and people from all over the world come together.. will her face register shock in imagining such things ever happened? One thought can spiral us into all the “what if worst case scenarios” descending us into the mire.

We have to step outside our thoughts at those moments and stop ourselves from falling down that rabbit hole of gloom. Learning how to interrupt the chains of thoughts that take us there is essential. Stop the panic rising in your chest! Pause. Breathe. Don’t imagine all the

what if's - come back to the now. Today. What is today? What good can come out of today? What good can I do for someone else today? Breathing mindfully and developing an intentional meditation practice can boost our immune system and our mental immune patterns.

However, what the Archbishop says is also true. It's not just Don't Worry, Be Happy platitude. Acknowledging that there are legitimate fears right now. Acknowledging disappointment that trips got cancelled and weddings postponed and daily life disruptive. Acknowledging our anger at what we can't control and disappointment over precautions that were not readied before this got to this point. Naming what we feel without letting it take over is important too.

We overcome the obstacles to JOY, first by accepting that suffering is part of life. If we thought life was going to be smooth without ever enduring a rough patch, we need to adjust our perception and recognize that life is a bumpy road. The tighter we try to control it the more shocks our body absorbs. Sometimes we just have to lessen the grip and bump along with the ride. Another thing is to let go of the notion that we are ever in control. Trying to control everything and everyone and the world around us brings great suffering. So, we recognize what we can impact, recognize what we cannot and realize that it does no good to fight against that which we cannot control.

I have to remind myself of these teachings often all day long. I also remember the Archbishop's words of grace which basically said, 'quit being so hard on yourself.'

"You are made for perfection, but you are not perfect. You are a masterpiece in the making."

I think these lessons are what we also hear in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes a letter of joy in difficult and uncertain times. Paul has suffered greatly. Paul wrote in unusual circumstances. He was in quarantine - so to speak. He can't come to be with the people of Phillipi like he would like, so he writes them a letter. He was in no quiet study dictating a letter to some secretary, but he writes from prison where the prospect was either execution or release. He was a cheerful prisoner. He reframes the situation. If he is put to death, then he will be with Christ. If he is to be released, then he would be free to continue his evangelical work. Throughout the letter Paul expresses Joy and Gratitude and the two go hand in hand. Paul's letter shows the mental immunity won through prayer, faith and practice and giving thanks. He writes, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Focus on the positive.

The **mental immunity challenge** before us isn't a vaccine, one dose, or quick fix. It doesn't mean we will not have sadness or any anxiety, but in this time, we have the opportunity to grow. We will develop practices to sink deep into our soul and connect with the holy who resides within each. We will discover the wellspring of God's love that will carry us through and yes, give us joy - even in anxious times - particularly in anxious times. We can rejoice in the Lord. We can sing Joy into the world as every heart prepares him room.

In community and solitude, we travel with God. We are not alone.