

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #26 YOU CAN AND SHOULD BE JOYFUL

You can and should be joyful. We have diverse notions in regard to joy, especially in connection with things religious. I personally find it hard to accept pictures of Jesus that are sad and depressing. In like manner, have you ever observed people approaching a church and laughing and conversing together, enjoying each other's company, but when they enter it they become suddenly serious and downcast? There is an apt story of a woman from a Fundamentalist rural congregation who attended a fashionable Park Avenue church. During the service, as the minister was about to commence his sermon, she rose and clapped her hands and called out, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen! Amen!" When one of the very correct ushers tiptoed up behind her and whispered to her most urgently to be still, she said, "But I've got religion! Bless you, Brother, I've got religion!" Whereupon he retorted, "But Madam, this is no place for that." No, it appears that joy is out of place in many religious institutions.

There are those who say that with all the world-wide problems this is hardly the time to be expressing joy. I am reminded of Bruce Barton telling of how a serious-minded reader took him to task for a remark he had made that was published in an article during the first World War and which had seemed too facetious. Barton replied that since we were indeed in the midst of a great war we should have twice as many jokes, and they should be twice as funny.

Find a completely happy person and closely scrutinize his life, and ask yourself just why he is happy. It is not because he is free of problems or upsets; it is rather despite these things that he maintains his mental poise. He could be a pessimist just as well as anyone else, but instead he remains an optimist. He is happy not because of what happens to him, but in spite of it. He is happy simply because he chooses to be happy. He chooses to release the spirit of joy which is innate within him, and he has come to know something about the liberating power of joy.

When a person goes about happy in the midst of troubles it will often be asked, "What does he have to be so happy about?" Well, he has joy to be happy about. What does a car have to keep its motor running? It has fuel in its tank; no matter what the conditions are surrounding the car, the motor runs as long as there is fuel on the inside. So it is with human joy, which is the fuel of a happy and grateful life. Remember the account in the scriptures of Paul and Silas being unjustly jailed? They did not as many of us would do bitterly complain about their lot. No, because they knew well that joy would keep them warm and secure and peaceful, they released the liberating power of joy. The scriptures tell us that about midnight when Paul and Silas were "praying and singing hymns unto God" suddenly there was an earth tremor so that the walls of the prison were shaken down, the doors opened, and the shackles of the prisoners loosened so everyone could depart.

To those of us in the clutches of adversity it may seem a travesty to praise God and give thanks, to sing the songs of joy, but so many who have endured for years find that constrictions vanish when they express the liberating power of joy, just as did Paul and Silas. So, when Jesus tells us to rejoice and be of good cheer he is pointing to a dynamic truth. The potential for rejoicing is already within us. Joy is a spiritual capacity, the unborn possibility of abundant living, and it is our privilege and our responsibility to release it.

In this context, I would like to pass along to you the account of Alva Romanes, who was imprisoned for many years, and how he developed an insight and an awareness that changed his entire life and which had come to him through a realization of the spirit of joy. The liberating power it released in him was expressed in a number of poems he wrote. When first imprisoned his poetry reflected his feelings of isolation and confinement. But then, into his heart came a new outlook, a spirit of joy that would not be bound, bringing a new beauty and hopefulness to him; then he

wrote: "I have a wider world to see,/Than that lean, narrow world I knew;/ And many a path that I must know,/Before I bid it all adieu./There are a thousand things to learn;/There are a thousand things undone;/There are a thousand things to teach;/ A thousand duties not begun;/And, where my life begins, I kneel/To worship with my opened eye/The glory of the Infinite/In countless forms that pass me by. This man, Alva Romanes, insisted that a personal rebirth of joy released him from prison, but more important he was released from the prison of his own thoughts. He went on to make a great success of his later life, achieving the respect of his community.

All this calls to mind the verse of Victor Hugo: "Be like the bird that pausing in her flight while on boughs too slight, feels them give way beneath her and yet sings, knowing that she hath wings." It is important for us to know that joy as a potential may be expressed at any time. It is ever within us, and there is ever the possibility for us to give birth to it. And, it carries with it a tremendous healing power. One man was burned over most of his body, and there was held to be little chance that he would recover. In order to keep his mind off of his extreme discomfort, he began to sing, and he kept on singing until the entire ward was singing with him. Songs of joy rang out and their spirit permeated the hospital. To the amazement of his doctors, the man recovered. What is more, he discovered a talent for singing that he had never before known he had, and he went on to sing for a living. Most important, he found a dynamic way of meeting life with a song.

I love the thought, "All things respond to the call of rejoicing; all things gather where life is a song." So, when your troubles appear most burdensome, start singing, start releasing the energy of joy. Smile, and confront daily life with a song. It could well be said that it is a lost day if in it you have not once laughed. If you are too busy to laugh, then you are too busy. William James taught his students that they could regulate their feelings by acting the part they wanted to feel. Speak with cheer and smile always. Work to prime yourself with the spirit of joy. Elbert Hubbard used to say, "Be pleasant til ten o'clock in the morning, and the rest of the day will take care of itself." Henry David Thoreau knew this too. He was in the habit of giving himself good news the very first thing in the morning, reminding himself how fortunate it was that he had been born so that he could enjoy the crunch of fresh snow underfoot, or the awe-inspiring twinkle of starlight, or the fragrance of a wood fire, or the love-light in another human's eyes. He commenced each day in the consciousness of thanksgiving, and the joy welled up within him and led to making things good happen to him.

Joy is contagious. You can actually set a chain reaction of smiles by how you start in the morning. Do not be a gloomcaster, be a joy-giver. Let your light shine. If someone remarks that a loud laugh denotes an empty mind, what of it? We should empty our minds once in a while to get rid of the limiting, negative attitudes that have lodged there, or of the bitter, dry congealing thoughts that wrinkle our flesh and cause our minds and souls to become warped and cramped. Let the spirit of joy express through you. We are told in the scriptures, "Blessed are ye that weep, for ye shall laugh."

Yes, you can, and you should be joyful!