

Next weekend brings us one of the most exciting events on TV but unfortunately it gets interrupted with segments of an often boring football game. Yes, during the super bowl all the cleverest new commercials get packed together in just a couple of hours – we might not care or even remember who won the game but we will talk about those commercials for days. Of course the basic purpose of commercials is to sell stuff but to do that they have to convince us that this product will make a difference in my life. Ultimately commercials sell happiness and we buy it even though we know that, at best, it might last as long as the smell of a new car but might be as fleeting as the flavor in a piece of gum. We buy those little doses of happiness like a drug fix but what we really want is something that will last and we don't know how to get that. Yet that is precisely what is addressed in the readings today when we are asked to rejoice, recognize our gifts and praise God for what he is doing in our midst.

In our reading from Nehemiah, the people of Israel are gathered on the occasion of the dedication of the newly rebuilt city of Jerusalem. And the residents of this new Jerusalem are also called to renew their faith in God. Part of that corporate rededication was to hear the reading of Scripture we now know as Deuteronomy. The priests read the scripture in one continuous reading, along with explanation and commentary, from dawn until noon (*remember that if you ever think mass talking too long!*).

As the reading progresses, the people heard the stories of God's redemptive hand through the Exodus from Egypt, the words of the Law and Commandments God gave to frame the covenant relationship between God and

humanity, and in spite of their repeated failures to remain loyal to their end of the covenant and in spite of their own experience in exile, what they heard was a story of God's faithfulness. The reading of the Law was meant to be a call to joy and thanksgiving, to a celebration of the present grace and mercy of God. So the priests called on the people to stop weeping, and to break forth into praise and festivity.

In our Gospel we find our Lord back in the synagogue where he grew up in Nazareth. But Jesus had not come back to Nazareth to wallow in childhood memories, even if they were sweet. This was not a high school reunion. And his message was not a Hallmark Card feel-good sermon. Jesus had come to inaugurate the in-breaking Kingdom of God, to shine the spotlight on the amazing love God has for us. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jesus and the presence of the Spirit means joy.

In the 21st century we're OK with entertainment and pleasure, but are suspicious of **joy** because so many times the "experts" caution us that it might just be a pie-in-the-sky illusion. Listen to this quote Pope Benedict XVI:

"Something I constantly notice is that unembarrassed joy has become rarer. Joy today is increasingly saddled with moral and ideological burdens, so to speak. When someone rejoices, he is afraid of offending against solidarity with the many people who suffer. I can understand that. There is a moral attitude at work here. But this attitude is nonetheless wrong. The loss of joy does not make the world better - and, conversely, refusing joy for the sake of suffering does not help those who suffer.

The world needs people who discover the good, who rejoice in it and thereby derive the impetus and courage to do good. In this connection, it always strikes me that in the poor neighborhoods of, say, South America, one sees many more laughing happy people than among us. Obviously, despite all their misery, they still have the perception of the good to which they cling and in which they can find encouragement and strength.

In this sense we have a new need for that primordial trust which ultimately only faith can give: That the world is basically good, that God is there and is good. That it is good to live and to be a human being. This results, then, in the courage to rejoice, which in turn becomes commitment to making sure that other people, too, can rejoice and receive good news.”

A few non-Catholic writers make the same point even more forcefully; writer Steven Brown says:

“You ought to live your life with such freedom and joy that uptight Christians will doubt your salvation.” AND he goes on, “If there is no laughter, Jesus has gone somewhere else. If there is no joy and freedom, it is not a church: it is simply a crowd of melancholy people basking in a religious neurosis. If there is no celebration, there is no real worship.”

I'll be honest; when I look out at this gathering sometimes I don't see much joy. No matter how bad your week was or next week will be, you are now in the presence of God; you have come here to be refreshed by an experience of his kingdom –

that ought to make enough difference to be seen. How do we reclaim the joy that should shine through us?

Most spiritual writers agree on three things that are joy busters:

1. **Unsatisfied expectations** – we expected better of our marriage, our job, our health, our kids, ourselves and we mourn for something we never had. The simple wisdom of the saints is to rejoice in what you do have; forget the rest.
2. **Unresolved conflict** – grudges, anger, stubbornness, they sap our energy and leave us lifeless. Yet every time we say the Lord's Prayer we ask to be forgiven as we forgive. It time for our actions to match our words.
3. **Unconfessed sin** – is there something we haven't dare to admit, even to ourselves? Guilt blocks joy just as sure as plac clogs an artery. We have a great gift in the sacrament of reconciliation; maybe we need to make better use of it.

On the flip side there are things that help us reclaim our joy; we need to recognize that:

1. **Joy is anchored in God's work and promise.** We are confident of our eternal destiny not because of our goodness but because of His. We are part of the most amazing process in the universe; take time to appreciate that.
2. **Joy is not hidden.** It is not something that is isolated and individual. We do not gather here to pray, at least not just to pray – you can do that somewhere else. We gather to celebrate the action of God in our lives. If you can only manage to smile once a week,

it should be when you approach the altar to meet your God in communion. If you can sing in the shower but not in church, if you make more noise watching football than responding to priest at mass then you are missing a wonderful opportunity to be joyful.

3. **Joy is shared.** You don't have to be a missionary or a street corner preacher to share what you have received from God. Paul said today that we all have different gifts and functions; joy comes from being ourselves and using our gifts for others.

I'll finish with by telling you about a commencement speech that was addressed to Harvard's Senior Class. On the morning of their graduation, seniors gather in Memorial Church to hear the minister offer words of solace and encouragement as they leave school to take their places in the world.

This is what the 1998 senior class heard from the Rev. Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard. He began: "You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to welcome you into the fellowship of educated men and women and, (*and here he paused and spoke each word slowly for emphasis*) you know just - how - dumb - you - really - are."

The senior class cheered in agreement.

"And worse than that," Doctor Gomes continued, "the world - and your parents in particular - are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact - no exceptions, no extensions."

"Nevertheless, there is reason to hope," Rev Gomes promised. "The future is God's gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to ABANDON you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. **Thus**, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid."

The message for that senior class, and for us, is that it is ok to be joyful – but not for what they had done or might do. Be joyful for the faithfulness and the promise of God's love and mercy.