

Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash: Healthy Spirituality: Inside Out – Joy and Sadness

Sunday, January 31, 2016

How can joy and sadness be spiritually healthy?

For many, joy and sadness would be an unlikely partnership. However, for Rev. Jana Purkis-Brash the exact opposite is the case. Happiness is healthy, so is sadness and both need to go together. She based her text on Psalm 139 and John 16:16-24 and concluded:

“My prayer for us is that Joy and Sadness are woven together in such a way that we are spiritually healthy and that our joy is rooted. “



There is a small part of me that is thankful for the blizzard last week. Let me explain. As I moved through the week preparing my sermon on Joy, I became more and more concerned that Joy and Sadness really needed to be together. In order to fully understand the healthy roles of these two emotions they need to be brought together as a team. So because of the storm and canceling worship last week, I have been able to do just that. We will see how this unlikely partnership helps us as we seek to be spiritually healthy and whole.

A main focus of *Inside Out* is the grounding of happiness. In a society that seeks joy in comfort, silliness, and diversion, [Pixar](#) presents a different picture of the full life. Being happy is not about eliminating or even minimizing emotions not named Joy. No one in history has ever succeeded with that approach. *Inside Out* refreshingly declares that the *good* life is not free from sadness or anger, but allows joy to live in a harmony with those other less comfortable emotions.

As we've mentioned previously the film enters the mind of a preteen, Riley, whose life has been disrupted by a cross-country move. The film's brilliance is in embracing the brokenness we all face. We all experience it, and yet so few stories on TV and on the big screen help us process and endure it. In *Inside Out*, life is hard, but not hopeless. Grief and sadness are meaningful, even valuable experiences.

We see Joy as the irrepressible “[Pollyanna](#)” of the emotions at work within Riley—she flatly refuses to let life's problems get her down and by extension, bring Riley down, so when Sadness comes on the scene during Riley's infancy, Joy sees her as a problem to be overcome. As Riley grows, so do Joy's frustrations with Sadness, particularly when she

discovers that Sadness has the capacity to turn the glowing golden orbs of Riley's happy memories sad by touching them. When Sadness causes herself and Joy—along with Riley's core memories—to be sucked into the larger world of Riley's mind, the two emotions must work together to make their way back to Headquarters and set things right.

It is on this journey through Riley's mind that Joy begins to see the need for Sadness, and more importantly, comes to a deeper understanding of what *joy* really is. To this point, Joy has seen herself as a cheerleader—the one around whom the other emotions rally in order to help Riley make happy memories, leading (as Joy describes it) to perfect days, weeks, months, years, and ultimately, a perfect life.

Joy in comfort, in silliness, in sports *can* be happy for a time, but there are no roots, at least not strong ones. It's fragile. One embarrassing moment in front of the class and it all comes crashing down. If life is about preserving that simple, child-like, playful happiness, then we're all lost and helpless.

Eventually — and sometimes very early on — life removes its kid gloves — the unexpected move, betrayal, divorce, sickness, failure, loss. Life will steal a child's happiness at age seven or seventeen or thirty-seven, and if we don't have a plan for joy after sadness comes, we'll be left frustrated, confused, and bitter. The film displays the futility of shortsighted, over-protective happiness.

The story begins with Joy frantically — though relentlessly cheerfully — micromanaging the team of emotions, striving to keep everything and everyone calm, predictable, and happy. The simplicity of a child's life lends itself to lots of simple and repeatable pleasure. By the end, though, Joy cherishes and cooperates with the others, seeing their inevitable and even critical roles in Riley's life.

Inside Out grounds joy — which in and of itself sets it apart from so many other movies — but still leaves it rootless. The joy is real, and even mature, but it's not safe or reliable. It's not made or even expected to last the stormy waves that will crash into our lives. When one island of personality falls — whether silliness or hockey or friendship — we'll start building another.

The message of *Inside Out* says that joy in this life can be real even when mixed with darker, harder memories and experiences. The film creatively and effectively protects us from thinking life is meant to be easy, fun, and carefree. True joy, the kind that survives suffering and endures pain, is not cheap or easy. It's laced — woven through and through — with sadness. So it is with Christ in an even more profound way. We are "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," and our joy is all the deeper and more enduring because of the grief.

Joy is a frantic (albeit happy) character trying to run the show. She vigilantly guards against Sadness getting too much time at the control panel and from touching any of the memories and turning them blue/sad.

[Check out this clip where Joy tries to keep sadness in her place.](#)

In the early part of the movie Joy frantically tries to keep Sadness away and only allows happy memories into Riley's long-term memory. But Riley's self-destructive behavior because she is so unhappy with her family's move can't be stopped until Sadness is allowed to participate. Joy alone could not build deep personality and community for young Riley. Sadness allowed for a richer experience of Joy in Riley's family and friendships. Riley emerged with a more complex and stable personality in which Joy was less frantic striving to never feel anything bad, and more a calm sense of wonderment at how all of our emotions and experiences work together to create who we are.

Too often we take verses such as [Philippians 4:4](#) "rejoice always" and use them as imperatives to push Sadness away from the control panels of our lives. Like Joy, we draw a circle and tell Sadness not to step outside it. But Joy is not the only emotion available to any of us, and the Joy spoken of in the Bible has nothing in common with the frantically cheerful character in this movie. The Joy spoken of in Scripture is one that is deep enough to endure hardship and abide in the presence of sorrow. If we insist on Joy exclusively running our control panels, we will create a fragile faith, much like Riley's personality bridges, that simply crumble when hardship comes. And it will come.

It is through her series of adventures and misadventures with Sadness and Bing Bong, Riley's imaginary friend, that Joy comes to realize that experiencing true joy is not simply about feeling happy all the time, and that sadness is often joy's most intimate traveling companion.



To the Christian imagination, this paradox makes perfect sense. In Scripture, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (see [Gal 5:22](#)), and yet, joy is *not* defined as unwavering peppiness or a stubbornly happy ignorance of the sadder, darker things of this world. Rather, Christian joy is rooted in the confidence that God is at work in the world, even in the midst of darkness and doubt. We find this in our gospel lesson as Jesus talks with the disciples about his departure. *"Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy."*

Then Jesus uses a woman in labor as an illustration for pain turning into joy. *“When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*

So let Joy flit around your heart. But don't be afraid to let Sadness have a voice, too. Sadness is not the enemy of Joy. Sometimes, Sadness helps us experience Joy with more depth and gratefulness.

Christian joy is able to look at the darkness and to know deep-down that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

We see Sadness “weep with” Bing Bong at the loss of his precious rocket. Sadness' ability to empathize brings comfort to Riley's once-beloved imaginary friend, and as she watches their interaction, Joy begins to realize for the first time that there might just be more to Sadness than she was willing to acknowledge. This growing realization reaches its pinnacle when all seems lost, and Joy experiences true sadness herself. In one of the most poignant moments of the film, Joy clings to some her favorite moments from Riley's life—memories that have wound up at the bottom of the memory dump. Broken-hearted, she weeps over the memory orbs, and later realizes that Sadness was just as much a part of helping create the happy memories as she herself was (albeit in her own way).

A reminder that God calls us to healthy spirituality in [Psalm 139](#), hear again the words of this psalm.

For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for you are fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are your works! You know me very well; My frame was not hidden from you, When I was being made in secret, Intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; In your book were written The days that were formed for me, Every day, before they came into being. How profound to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

By the time Joy and Sadness finally make it back to Headquarters, Joy has learned to see that she and Sadness are more closely intertwined than she ever would have thought possible, that joy which overlooks sadness is vapid and fleeting, and sadness without joy is despair.

We hear it also in this quote from [William Blake](#)

“Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine,
Under every grief and pine,
Runs a joy with silken twine.
It is right it should be so,

We were made for joy and woe,
And when this we rightly know,
Through the world we safely go.”

My prayer for us is that Joy and Sadness are woven together in such a way that we are spiritually healthy and that our joy is rooted