

## My conversion to joy

Julia Gingrich

**T**his is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). During the summer of 2013, I had the privilege of interning at St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Elkhart, Indiana, a church where these words are frequently uttered from the pulpit as an invitation to joyfully worship the God of life. The worship culture of St. James is profoundly marked by an attitude of joy and praise. “*Thank you, Lord, that we have seen another day*” is a common prayer in this congregation which is located in a marginalized urban community. There is deep joy and heartfelt gratitude simply to be alive. Through my ministry experience at St. James, I discovered that cultivating a

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I began contemplating the role of joy in Christian discipleship several months before my internship began, when Chris Marshall preached a sermon on this subject at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where I was studying.<sup>1</sup> Prior to hearing his sermon, I had given little consideration to a theology of joy for the mission of the church. I struggled with joy. For me, mournful prayers of lament and intercession always flowed more easily than

joyful prayers of praise and thanksgiving. I tended to focus my spiritual gaze on all that is unhealed and unjust in our world. Part of my difficulty with joy related to an underlying fear of being perceived as naïve, insensitive, or out of touch with what’s really happening. Hence my pattern of succumbing to the old “How can we be joyful and praise God for this beautiful day when there is a civil war going on in Syria?” syndrome.

It was Chris Marshall's sermon that compelled me to give joy a second chance—to cease dismissing it as a naïve and trivial component of Christian spirituality, and begin marveling at its

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distinctive capacity to coexist with suffering and pain. Through this sermon the Spirit invited me to receive God's gift of tenacious joy, a gift that empowers us to live hopefully in a world rife with struggle and oppression of all kinds.

Several months after this initial awakening to joy, I began my internship at St. James. There I was embraced by a community of faith that accompanied me on a deep conversion to joy, to praise, and to thanksgiving. The saints of St. James became my teachers of joy. In *Then Shall Your Light Rise: Spiritual Formation and Social Witness*, Joyce Hollyday

writes about the necessity of joy for building God's kingdom of peace and justice. She encourages Christians of privileged social locations to move toward the margins in order to learn about authentic and persistent joy from God's people who are struggling for life.

*Just as people with the least are often the most grateful and generous, I have found that people who suffer most are often the most joyful—another irony of faithfulness. Their joy is something wholly other than the shallow happiness that the world offers. It comes not from trying to avoid pain by accruing comforts but rather from moving deeply into the world's pain and finding reasons to rejoice in the midst of embracing what is difficult. It is the joy of resurrection, known only by passing through crucifixion.<sup>2</sup>*

I am deeply grateful for the way God extended the gift of joy to me through the St. James family of faith. Drawing on Chris Marshall's work, I will now highlight how I witnessed this congregation embodying the life-sustaining joy of the gospel in their worship, fellowship, and mission.

## The joy of resurrection faith

Chris Marshall identifies four interconnected realities that generate Christian joy. One source of joy is belief in Jesus' resurrection and victory over the powers of death and evil. Interning at an African American church during a time when significant court cases were playing out—such as the gutting of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the acquittal of George Zimmerman in his killing of Trayvon Martin—opened my eyes to the vital role that *resurrection faith* plays in empowering those who experience oppression to remain hopeful amid the crushing blows of interpersonal and systemic violence.

On the Sunday morning immediately following George Zimmerman's acquittal, Rev. Jennifer Tinsley opened the worship service with a prayer that attended to the pain, anger, and fear felt by members of the congregation who are vulnerable to the dehumanizing and deadly forms of racial profiling that tragically claimed Trayvon's Martin's life. Holding the pain of her people, Rev. Tinsley dared to assert the congregation's belief in Jesus' definitive victory over the unjust structures of our world. She opened the prayer with this confession of faith: "God, we know you to be the reigning God of justice."

In the days following the not-guilty verdict I read an article by Drew Hart, a theologian who brings together black theology and Anabaptism, that further revealed to me how resurrection faith emboldens God's people to persistently struggle for a more just society. Writing to all those grieved by the miscarriage of justice in the Trayvon Martin case, Hart offered words of comfort that are worth quoting at length:

*For those that are hurting and struggling today, here is some pain medicine. God . . . continues to hear the cries of the oppressed and violated. God took on human flesh so that he once and for all could overcome the death-dealing and sinful forces that oppress and do violence to the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable . . .*

*Jesus conquered death and the cross through resurrection. And God invites us to be part of his Resurrection world that overcomes the violence and oppression of this current world and to participate in the world to come, where the*

*vulnerability of young men like Trayvon (and our loved ones) will no longer happen.*

*And so, as we struggle today, let's not struggle in despair, but in a hope for what is to come. A hope that stirs deep in our souls as we struggle for justice and peace with our backs straight and our heads lifted high, because God is with us and will vindicate us, no matter what the courts rule, the laws enforce, or how people respond. Today, we proclaim that Jesus our liberator, in solidarity with us, reigns and is victoriously marching us towards Zion.<sup>3</sup>*

The St. James community of faith showed me that resurrection faith makes it possible for us to live hopefully and courageously in a culture that is bent on violence and destruction. When the world gives out, our energy is depleted, and injustice is all around, we are lifted into the arms of God who has secured the victory of love and life over violence and death. And that is cause for joy—life-sustaining joy that is “beyond description and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:18).<sup>4</sup>

### **The joy of discovering grace**

Chris Marshall identifies a second source of Christian joy as the discovery of grace—the awareness of having received a radical forgiveness of sins and freedom from the sinful systems of our world. At St. James, people come to worship *needing* and *expecting*

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to be touched by the saving power of God. They come ready to fall on their knees at the altar and offer up their broken hearts and wounded lives to God. In assuming this posture of utter dependency, they open themselves to receive the outpouring of grace that flows from the heart of God.

Through worshiping at St. James, my Anabaptist understanding of discipleship, with its heavy emphasis on ethical living, underwent a conversion. As I joined the

congregation in kneeling at the altar to confess my brokenness, I discovered that discipleship is first and foremost about receiving the gift of Jesus—receiving the gift of forgiveness that empowers

us to walk in a “newness of life.” Seeing Jesus first as gift *for us*, and then as a model for the life of faith, brings us to a place of thankfulness that cannot but result in joyful celebration. St. James taught me that our restoration is not complete until some spirited rejoicing gets underway—until we sing, clap, and dance in praise of the God who saves us. I am immensely grateful for the way this life-celebrating community of faith helped me shake loose and surrender my body and soul to the joy of being connected to Jesus and caught up in God’s grace.

### **The joy of belonging to a new community**

A third source of joy that Chris Marshall highlights is the experience of belonging to a new family of faith where we are drawn into relationships of support and solidarity that bridge the social divides of our culture. St. James practices Christ-like hospitality by welcoming members and visitors with a warmth and enthusiasm that fosters a joyful sense of belonging. They are especially intentional about embracing those who are enduring the isolating pain of abuse, addiction, homelessness, and incarceration. All those who walk through the doors of St. James are invited into a fellowship of faith where the life of each person is honored and joyfully affirmed: “*Welcome to Saint James, where everybody is somebody!*”

On my very first Sunday at St. James, the congregation affirmed my presence among them by giving me a standing ovation. I was deeply touched by this gracious expression of welcome that was extended to me before I did anything—before I had the chance to demonstrate my pastoral skills and prove myself as a ministering person. I was lovingly welcomed for simply being who I am: a daughter of God, a sister in Christ. On my last Sunday at St. James, Rev. Tinsley laid her hand on my shoulder and offered a prayer which included these words: “*God, we thank that through Julia’s presence here with us, we have been reminded that in Christ, there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, black nor white.*” This prayer abides with me, persistently reminding me of the relational joy that enlivens the body of Christ when we embrace risky opportunities to love across differences in order to see the Spirit tear down the dividing walls of hostility.

## **The joy of the sweet Holy Spirit**

The fourth source of Christian joy that Chris Marshall elevates is the experience of being immersed in the presence of the Holy Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts. Over the course of my internship at St. James, joy took up residence in my heart as I grew ever more aware of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in my own life and in the lives of others. One way this happened was by singing "There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place," a song by Doris Akers that attunes our souls to the gracious movements of the Holy Spirit in our midst. "*Sweet Holy Spirit, sweet heavenly Dove, stay right here with us, filling us with your love.*" Worship begins by calling on the "*sweet heavenly Dove*" to hover over us and fill us with a love that heals, a love that comforts, a love that revives and empowers us to live in the strength and fullness of our calling. When the Holy Spirit pours this kind of love into our hearts, the joy stirring within us is made visible through the "*sweet expressions on each face.*"

## **Joy—the energy of God's kingdom**

I am profoundly grateful for all the ways that St. James helped me to discover that, in the words of Chris Marshall, "Joy is the energy of God's kingdom." It is joy that generates the kingdom-seeking energy we need in order to be healthy and vibrant communities of faith that sustain life in a culture of death. Again, Joyce Hollyday reminds us of the importance of seeking out teachers of joy as we engage the hard work of building God's kingdom of peace and justice:

*Living as we do in a world that suffers so much, two opposing possibilities can easily tempt us: either to turn our backs and live oblivious to the pain or to allow the pain to overwhelm us and despair to take up residence in our hearts. The truly faithful option is to face the pain and live joyfully in the midst of it. Those who suffer most remind us of how tragic and arrogant it would be for us to lose hope on behalf of people who have not lost theirs. They are teachers of joy.<sup>5</sup>*

The saints of St. James are my teachers of joy. They continually remind me that discipleship involves both following Jesus into the

pain of our current world and following Jesus into the joy of God's new resurrection world. When we stay connected to the Jesus of the cross and the Jesus of the resurrection, we are empowered to embody the gospel hopefully, courageously, and *joyfully* in a world that desperately needs it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Chris Marshall's sermon, "Joy, the Energy of Present Redemption," in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Hollyday, *Then Shall Your Light Rise: Spiritual Formation and Social Witness* (Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1997), 93–94.

<sup>3</sup> Drew Hart, "Pain Medicine: Trayvon, Simon of Cyrene, and Jesus," *drewgihart.com/* (blog), June 15, 2013, <http://drewgihart.com/2013/07/15/pain-medicine-trayvon-simon-of-cyrene-and-jesus/>.

<sup>4</sup> Hollyday, *Then Shall Your Light Rise*, 95.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

## About the author

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