

Accounting for joy

A sermon

Anita Yoder Kehr

It all started with one of those quotations that get attached as a thought-provoking after-thought in the signature field of an email message. I'm not even sure anymore where this one came from, but the attribution was to a "rabbinic text." It went something like this: "We will someday have to give an account to God for all the good things our eyes beheld that we refused to enjoy."

That's not what we usually think about when we imagine giving an account of our lives to God. At least I don't. I think more often about Matthew 25, where the sheep are divided from the goats on the basis of whether they've responded to need: to those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned. Or I think about the Sermon on the Mount, about whether

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I've governed my thoughts and behavior according to Jesus' ethic of self-giving love. I had never imagined the possibility of giving an account about whether I've enjoyed the good and generous gifts of God.

I tracked down the source of this quote, and it does seem to be from a rabbinic text dating back to the fourth or fifth century.¹ It isn't scripture, but this rabbinical observation on our human duty to enjoy all the good things our eyes behold is, I think, compatible with scripture. Scripture is filled with exhortations to rejoice and be glad, to delight in God and in God's gifts. The psalmist writes: "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion" (Ps. 65:1;

NRSV). And there is no better way to praise God than to enjoy the gifts that God, in abundant generosity, gives.

*Praise is due to you, O God—
praise flowing from a heart of recognition*

*and gratitude and joy.
We owe you praise because you answer our prayers.
You forgive our sin.
You bring us into your presence.
You deliver us from slavery
and into the freedom of salvation.
Praise is due to you for your power exhibited in all of creation.
Praise is due to you for the beauty you infuse
into the exquisite details of our world.
Praise is due to you, O God, for your sustenance,
for the rain that waters the earth,
for the sun that nourishes it,
for the abundance of your provision.
Praise is due to you, O God, for human love,
for the relationships you knit
among friends and family members,
forebears and progeny, by blood and by common faith.
Praise is due to you for our bodies,
for movement and growth and touch.
Praise is due to you, O God,
because in sorrow and suffering and pain, in the face of evil,
you do not abandon us
but walk with us through the dark valley,
the suffering of the cross
united with the life of the resurrection.
Praise is due to you, O God, for the movement of your Spirit
that enables us to walk in your way,
to delight in you,
to celebrate your good gifts.
Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion.*

Protecting ourselves against wonder

There is a thirst in our world, I think, for delight and joy, and there is, at the same time, a fear of it. To delight in what we see, to enjoy the gifts we behold, is to open ourselves to wonder, to become vulnerable in a way that makes middle-class, educated North Americans uncomfortable. Our sense of safety rests to some extent in a cynical or skeptical view of the world: if we don't hope for anything, we won't be disappointed. Or we trust in our own

observation and understanding; what we can't dissect and intellectualize we put away as irrelevant.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, another rabbi (but this one from the twentieth century), wrote about radical amazement:

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a legacy of wonder. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to take things for granted. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin. . . .

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. [Humankind] will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. . . . What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.”²

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and professor of religion, tells a story about the vulnerability of wondering enjoyment. She and a friend were walking on a fine spring morning across the campus of Georgia State University. As on most college campuses in the early springtime on particularly beautiful days, students had spilled out of the dorms and libraries and classrooms to enjoy the first warmth of the season. They filled the plaza with its flowing fountain where Taylor and her friend were walking and discussing deep, adult matters. “All of a sudden,” Taylor writes,

my friend just snapped. He ran over to the water fountain, plunged his hands into it and drenched himself. Then he ran back to me, squealing like a five-year-old, and put his cold, wet hands on either side of my face.

I was appalled, absolutely appalled. Everyone was staring. And I'll tell you the worst part. The worst part was that I wanted to throw a scarf over his head, because his face was so completely open, so utterly defenseless, that I could hardly stand to look at it. I didn't say it, but I thought it: “For heaven's sake, man, get hold of yourself! You've got to learn to protect yourself better than that. Think what could happen to you if you walked around letting everyone see who you are like that. You could get

hurt! You could scare someone!” Now, all these years later, I wish I could find him and tell him that he was right and I was wrong. I wish I could tell him about Moses, who came down the mountain of the Lord with a face so bright that he wore a veil so he wouldn’t frighten anyone.”³

Enjoying the good gifts of God requires a certain vulnerability, a certain willingness to let go of constraint and simply experience the joy of the Lord. In these past few months, as these ideas about enjoying God and God’s generous gifts have tumbled through my mind, I began to recall times when as a younger woman with little children, I’d sometimes twirl around our living room in sheer joy. I’d make sure that the curtains were all closed, that the children were all napping, and then I’d dance. Now you have to understand that I’m a klutz and that I would never do anything like that in public, not by a long shot. You might be the first people I’ve ever told about this. But it turned out that my twirling and reaching up was a way of giving the praise due to God, of expressing enjoyment in life. And as these memories returned—accompanied by blushes of embarrassment—I realized that it has been a very long time since I’ve danced. Perhaps my eyes have become blinkered to wonder, my heart more hardened to delight. It takes some effort to sustain wonder in a world such as ours.

And the plight of our world does invite us to consider the propriety of enjoyment. How dare we claim to enjoy gifts of God when evil seems to be running amok in genocide, in warfare, in poverty, and in plague? When selfishness and materialism seem to be governing our culture and seeping into our own selves? When distorted theologies suggest that accumulating wealth equates with accumulating spiritual blessing? How dare we focus on enjoyment? *How dare we not?*

Our reason for being: to glorify and enjoy God

In 1647, in post-civil war England, the Westminster Assembly drew up a “shorter catechism” of questions and answers as a tool for offering instruction in the faith for the common person. Still in use in some settings today, the first question goes like this: “What is the chief end of [hu]mankind?” And the answer is this: “[Hu]mankind’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever.”⁴

Enjoyment of God's own self is where we begin and where we end. It is precisely as we see and recognize and name God's presence with us that we find joy and learn to enjoy God even—and maybe especially—in the midst of all that is wrong in our world. We learn to trust in God's faithfulness and to rely on the hope that

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comes from believing that God's way and wisdom are far beyond our understanding. Joy comes when we learn dependence on our Creator and our Savior, even when we are only catching glimpses in times of chaos and suffering.

Indeed, dwelling more and more consciously in the presence of God, enjoying God, enlarges and deepens our capacity both for joy and for sorrow. It's been said that as we grow in love for God and for other people,

we become more open to appreciate the beauty and the joys of this life and this world and also more open to its sorrow and brokenness.⁵

As we enjoy God and God's gifts, we also find that we're called to share those gifts. We are being formed, in joy, to respond to the need of those around us: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. We are learning to live by the self-giving ethic described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, to take our cross upon us because we *know* about the gift of the resurrection life. Our discipleship, even when it leads to sorrow and precariousness, becomes rooted in the joy that is found only in the presence of God. And our joy increases—our roots grow deeper—as we follow the way of God as lived and taught by Jesus and as enabled by the Holy Spirit. Disciples who exhibit only grim-faced duty, who refuse to enjoy the good gifts of God-given life, yield a curious witness: why would anyone want to join in the walk if there is no delight, no appreciation, no joy in a life of following Jesus?

Joy—and enjoyment—is both an act of will and a gift of God. It is a decision to *look* for all the good that God has given. It's a choice to *behold* God's presence in the world. It is an act of will to lay aside cynicism and skepticism and to cultivate wonder and

awe instead. But the choice, the decision, the act of will is all in response to the gifts of God: the gift of God's first loving us, the gift of God's presence with us, the gifts of God's good creation—including the created world and our human relationships, the gifts of the salvation of Jesus Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Our praise is certainly due to you, O God!

Take joy!

The last time I met with my spiritual director, I shared the rabbinical quote with her, the one from the beginning of this sermon: “We will someday have to give an account to God for all the good things our eyes beheld that we refused to enjoy.” I shared with her my further thinking about the difficulty and the discipline of first looking for what is good and right rather than what is evil and wrong. I told her about the difference it makes in my perspective when I can manage to enjoy the good in the created world, in my family, in my congregation, in our community. She thought for a moment and she said, “There’s a poem that says some of the same things, something about ‘take joy.’ Fra Giovanni, I think.”

I had never heard of this Fra Giovanni, but I returned to the office and did some searching, and I discovered that in 1513, on Christmas Eve, this priest, scholar, architect, and teacher had written a letter to a dear friend of his. Now let his letter be the end to this sermon, my invitation to you to behold and to take joy:

I am your friend and my love for you goes deep. There is nothing I can give you which you have not. But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today. Take heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see. And to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by the covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard.

Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, touch the angel's hand that brings it to you.

Everything we call a trial, a sorrow or a duty, believe me, that angel's hand is there, the gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing presence. Your joys, too, be not content with them as joys. They, too, conceal diviner gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty—beneath its covering—that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it; that is all! But courage you have, and the knowledge that we are all pilgrims together, wending through unknown country home.⁶

Notes

¹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 4:2; cited in William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (March 1974), 84.

The Jerusalem (or Palestinian) Talmud is a collection of rabbinic notes on the second-century Mishnah (Jewish oral tradition), compiled in Israel in the fourth or fifth century CE (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_Talmud).

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1959), 43, 46.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit*, 5, no. 4 (October-December 1996), 16.

⁴ The Westminster Shorter Catechism; available at <http://www.shortercatechism.com/>.

⁵ From Gerald G. May, *The Awakened Heart* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 102.

⁶ Fra Giovanni Giocondo, Letter to Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi, Christmas Eve, 1513; available at http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/fra_giovanni.htm.

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