

The Gospel According to Peanuts: Joy On Top Of The Doghouse

John 15:9-11, Philippians 4:4-7

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Of all the characters Charles Schulz created for his iconic comic strip *Peanuts*, the one who evolved the most over the comic's its fifty-year run was Snoopy. When *Peanuts* debuted in 1950, Snoopy was just a regular puppy who stood on four feet and just did the normal sorts of things that puppies do. Then, in 1952, Schulz added thought balloons to his portrayal of Snoopy so readers could get some insight into what was going on in his busy dog brain. That was also around the time that Snoopy began impersonating other animals - over the years, that included a vulture, a snake, a moose, and, of course, all the animals in the Christmas play! It wasn't until 1956 that Snoopy got up on his two hind legs and began to move like a human being, and with that came the much-beloved Snoopy happy dance!

You know what I'm talking about, right? When Snoopy is happy, he sticks his nose straight up in the air, stretches out his ears and his arms, smiles the most adorable smile, and starts moving those feet in a dance of sheer joy. While Snoopy has many other endearing characteristics, including his vast imagination which generates all kinds of alter egos, his signature is the happy dance.

That makes him different from the human kids in *Peanuts*. While Charlie Brown worries and Lucy bosses other people around and Linus seeks security from his blanket, Snoopy dances. What absorbs the others, kites stuck in trees, unrequited love, the Great Pumpkin, and so on, just doesn't faze Snoopy. It's as if he has discovered another way to inhabit the world - one in which joy is always readily at hand.

I suspect that is what makes Snoopy's dancing so delightful to us. Like the *Peanuts* kids, we live in a world full of people and events that leave us anxious. We know what it is to live with unresolved problems or to wake up and wonder what comes next. And we are living through a particularly intense version of that uncertainty right now.

Our political life feels increasingly brittle. Public conversation has become harsher. Immigration enforcement and the treatment of migrants have become matters of fear and moral urgency. Questions of racial justice, LGBTQ+ dignity, reproductive freedom, economic inequality, climate change, and the future of democracy are not abstract questions for many people. They touch families, neighbors, students, colleagues, and friends.

And in a university community like ours, there is a whole other layer of worry. People whose vocation is to ask questions sometimes feel as though asking the wrong question has become dangerous. People who teach and research are navigating funding cuts as well as arguments about academic freedom, public trust in expertise, the role of universities, and who gets to determine what may be taught or studied. Students are trying to imagine a future in a society that often seems exhausted by conflict before they have even begun their adult lives.

Meanwhile, the news never stops. Our phones put the anxieties of the entire world into our

pockets before breakfast. We can receive five pieces of terrible news before we've even said good morning to the person sitting beside us. So, it is entirely possible to become spiritually exhausted before ever leaving the house. It is in a world like this that Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Rejoice, Paul, really? Do you know what is happening? And the answer is yes. That is precisely why he says it.

When Paul encourages us to rejoice, he isn't talking about some kind of superficial cheerfulness. He doesn't ask us to ignore grief and injustice or offer each other platitudes like "everything happens for a reason" or "just choose joy". That kind of shallow spirituality is not biblical. The psalms are full of lament. The prophets rage against injustice. Jesus weeps over the death of his friend, Lazarus. Paul himself experiences imprisonment, conflict, deprivation, uncertainty, and grief.

The joy Paul is speaking of doesn't say "Nothing is wrong" but rather, "What is wrong is not all that is true." It doesn't deny suffering but rather recognizes that suffering doesn't hold ultimate power over us. And it doesn't promise that everything will work out the way we want it to, but rather assures us that whatever happens, God will remain faithful.

God's faithfulness is exactly why we can rejoice. The circumstances of our lives change. Government changes. Presidents change. Universities change. Families change. Jobs change. We change. But God is consistent, ever-present, offering us love and grace that are absolute and immutable, and for that, we can rejoice always - even in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

Let's be clear, though, that joy doesn't allow us to be indifferent to what happens around us. The things we worry about matter - that's why we worry about them! They matter because people matter. Policies matter because bodies matter. Laws matter because neighbors matter. Budgets matter because hungry people matter. Immigration policy matters because migrants are human beings. Voting rights matter because all people bear the image of God. Climate policy matters because creation belongs to God. The treatment of LGBTQ+ people matters because they are beloved children of God. Economic structures matter because no person's dignity should depend upon whether they happen to have been born into wealth.

The beauty of our faith tradition, of United Methodism, is that John Wesley taught that our personal holiness, our faith and our joy in God, leads us inevitably into social holiness. Our Social Principles explicitly describe social engagement as an expression of Christian discipleship and call the church to work for justice, peace, human dignity, and the common good. We are called to joy without surrendering to complacency or despair.

In fact, the biblical tradition joins joy and justice together. The prophets imagine a world in which the poor are lifted up and the oppressed go free—and they call that good news. Jesus announces good news to the poor. Mary sings because God is scattering the proud and lifting up the lowly. The early church shares resources so that people are not left in need. And John Wesley insists that holiness cannot be separated from love of neighbor. You cannot love God while becoming indifferent to the people God loves.

So, joy is not the opposite of justice. Joy is what keeps justice from becoming despair. If

we believe that God is at work, we can keep working. If we believe grace is real, we can forgive without giving up. If we believe resurrection is real, we can resist death-dealing systems without becoming convinced that death has already won. If we believe God's kingdom is coming, we can plant seeds whose harvest we may never see. That is why even now we can dance a happy dance.

The power to dance, the courage to dance, comes from Jesus's words in John 15. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." "Abide in my love". Remain in my love. Stay. Find your grounding here. And then he goes on to say, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Draw your joy from the love that will never abandon you.

Jesus speaks these words just before he is arrested. He knows what's coming. He knows the end is near. Yet, he speaks of joy - the joy he has found in God and offers to us. Joy is the confidence that God's love is more secure than any circumstances the world may hand us. And with that confidence we know that even as God's love pours continuously into us, it pours out of us onto the brokenness of the world.

Which brings us back to Snoopy on top of his doghouse. Snoopy isn't dancing because all the problems of the world have disappeared. He is dancing because those problems don't tell the whole story. And perhaps that is a useful image for Christian life in this particular moment. We don't climb onto the doghouse to escape the world. We climb there to see the world more clearly. We see the suffering. We see the injustice. We see the political conflict. We see the frightened immigrant family. We see the student who doesn't know whether they belong. We see the LGBTQ+ teenager wondering whether the church will reject them. We see the person working two jobs and still unable to make rent. We see the exhausted professor. We see the neighbor who has lost hope. We see the planet under pressure. We see the polarization. We see the lies. We see the fear. We see all of it.

And then we look again. And we see Christ. We see the empty tomb. We see grace. We see the Spirit still moving. We see people still loving one another. We see communities still resisting cruelty. We see strangers still caring for strangers. We see people still choosing mercy. We see the church still becoming the church.

C.S. Lewis called joy "the serious business of Heaven." I think we need that theology right now. Because joy can sound irresponsible in a suffering world. But sometimes joy is precisely what allows us to engage the suffering. Joy says: Despair does not own us. Hatred will not determine who we become. Fear will not decide our future. Cruelty will not teach us to become cruel. The powerful do not have the final word. God is still at work.

That is not naïve. It is defiant.

Snoopy gets on top of the doghouse and dances despite the problems of the world that surround him. And maybe that is where we are called to stand, as well. Not above the world. Not away from the world. But in the middle of it, seeing it through the eyes of resurrection. We don't dance because everything is okay. We dance because God is not finished. We dance because grace is still at work. We dance because love is still possible. We dance because justice is worth pursuing. We dance because our neighbors are worth loving. We dance because despair is not our

only option. We dance because Christ is risen. And because Christ is risen, we can go back down from the doghouse and get to work.

May it be so. Amen.