

3rd Sunday in Advent

Cycle B-2023

Today, we celebrate rejoice Sunday! Our second reading from 1st Thessalonians calls us to “Rejoice always.” Rejoicing is an abundance of joy in our hearts and lives. We can experience it in a subtle or intense manner. We can experience it as love, peace, hope, or a spirit of playfulness.

The whole reality of joy is a big deal for me because it eluded me for more than half of my life. Early in priesthood, there were friends who would say, “Karl, you’re a good guy, but you have such sad eyes.” Since our eyes are the windows to our souls, they revealed my deep and lingering wounds from the sufferings of my earlier life. The source of my anguish was two-fold. I was broken because of my life long emotionally distant relationship with my father. The distance was created by his steady stream of unsolicited advice and “so called” constructive criticism that often felt like criticism. It was compounded by my unwillingness to open my heart to him, even when he made genuine efforts to change.

The second source of my anguish was feeling completely insignificant to my peers. I was not bullied or picked on. I was considered a “nice guy,” but for all practical purposes, I was invisible to them. I discovered that being invisible can also contribute to deep emotional woundedness. There were times that the anguish was so constant and overwhelming, that I struggled with fleeting suicidal thoughts. With the gift of hindsight, I now realize that this emotional pain was my fault to a certain degree, because of my tendencies at that time of being overly self-conscious and sensitive.

Regardless of the complex reasons, God is totally committed to bringing good out of every life situation. Through the emotional pain I endured, I eventually learned the path to a LIFE OF JOY. I discovered that it is a three-fold relational journey. The three dimensions are intertwined and inseparable. They tend to positively or negatively influence one another.

The first dimension of joy is SELF-LOVE. There are several things needed to bring about this joy. It involves nurturing, protecting, and living out our lives, according to our true selves. Our true self is the person that God has created us to be and is calling us to be in the present moment. We honor and celebrate the good in our own

personality, path to God, value system, and character. We honor and celebrate our own healthy and holy needs and giftedness. In doing so, we become vigilant and conscientious about both our soul care and our self-care. Self-love leads us not to compromise our true selves for anybody, regardless of the person or the personal or professional cost.

Self-love leads us to continually forgive ourselves for our sinfulness, failures, mistakes, limitations, and idiosyncrasies. The sign that we have arrived is when we can laugh at and even poke fun of ourselves.

Nonetheless, as an expression of self-love, we also strive for personal, spiritual, and moral excellence, even though consistent perfection and success will elude us. We are called to have an unconditional love for ourselves regardless of our popularity, life experiences, or personal character, at any given moment. This unconditional love is the secret of enjoying our own company and being comfortable in our own skin.

The second dimension to joy is having healthy and life-giving relationships with other PEOPLE. Even though we all have different relational needs, we all have a need to connect with people on the levels of love, friendship, and being acquaintances. We need different types of people

in our lives. We need the deep and the light-hearted; thinkers, doers, and the dreamers; gentle and tough love people; and the outgoing and reserved; etc. etc. etc.

One factor that can enrich the joy of our relationships is learning to be vulnerable with certain trusted people. In being vulnerable, they experience the fuller spectrum of who we are and what we are all about. There is a joy in being truly known by another person or group of people and still being loved with our jagged edges and inner demons. The joy of vulnerability is not usually forged through pridefully bragging about our success, achievements, charity, or personal holiness. It is in the mutual sharing of our life experiences, common interests, struggles, and eventual transformation, that we reach new heights of relational joy.

Relational joy escalates through our willingness to ask for and to grant, the gift of forgiveness. This involves a willingness to work through the problems with mutual respect and self-control, instead of settling for a false peace through conflict avoidance. In order for us to experience more joyful relationships, it is essential for us to celebrate the best in other people. This comes through intentionally focusing on their most redeeming qualities and their personal giftedness. This helps us to see them

as a whole person and to resist completely defining them by some of their less appealing traits.

The third dimension of joy is a strong relationship with GOD. For this to be a reality, it is crucial for us to have a healthy and truthful image of God. This involves several realizations. God loves us and wants a unique individual relationship with us. God wants to always be there for us in our joys, sorrows, and life experiences. Whenever we sin, God continues to love us with all of His heart. He calls us to change so that we can have a more fulfilling life and relationships, including our relationship with Him. God does not punish us. We punish ourselves through the choices we make. God can still work through us and listen to our prayers, even when we are not in a good personal and spiritual place. This is a God we can trust and give our hearts to.

Because of the way we were made by God, our joy grows in proportion to the depth of our intimacy and union with Him. Even if we have a deep joy in our relationships within ourselves and with other people, our joy will not be complete if something is out of whack in our relationship with God.

I would now like to share the rest of my story. Over the years, I have gone from sad eyes to happy eyes. My eyes now reveal the joy that I experience in the depths of my soul. There is even a former parishioner who refers to me as “Fr. Smiley.” The healing I have experienced is truly a miracle of God’s amazing grace. It was a gradual process that involved a growing knowledge and experience of love from God, others, and for myself. I found that my love for God and others tended to grow in proportion to my self-love. On the other hand, my experience of love from God and others helped me to grow in self-love. As a result, I felt more confident and inwardly free, to both give and receive love.

There is one experience along this journey to joy that I would like to share with you. I had a supernatural reconciliation experience with my father. It occurred on Sunday, June 3rd, in 2007. This was the day that St. Joseph Church celebrated my 10th anniversary as a priest. Dad was unable to attend due to his declining health from colon cancer. He asked for me to visit him after so I could share the details of the party. After I finished sharing, I prayed over Him, anointed him. and gave him holy communion, as was our normal custom when I visited. As I began, the Holy Spirit came upon him in the

most powerful way. He began crying uncontrollably. I knew it was the Holy Spirit because my dad was not a crier. He grabbed my head and pulled me to his chest. Amid his deep sobs, he cried out that he loved me and was sorry for everything he had ever done to me. Overwhelmed by this experience, I began to cry, and I asked dad to forgive me. It was the last time we ever spoke. Later that night, he lost consciousness and died the following Friday morning, June the 8th. The last words we ever spoke were words of mercy and reconciliation. For a father and son who were emotionally distant for a lifetime, when he passed from this life, my head was literally laying on his heart. I heard and felt his last heartbeat on this side of eternity. Estrangement in life, total union and intimacy in death. That is the power of God, who is always at work in us. I was even more blown away about how I felt after this reconciliation experience with my father. In what seemed like an instance, I felt a joy, peace, confidence, and sense of wholeness, that had always eluded me. This became a dramatic turning point in my life as it ushered in a new joy of being more open to giving and receiving love from my Heavenly Father, other people, and myself.

Joy is ultimately a relational reality because God is love. We have a relational God. As a result, our God is a joy maker! “Rejoice always. Again, I say rejoice.”