BUT WHAT ABOUT THE JOY?

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> *Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake.*
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> The Book of Common Prayer, 1979

Thank you for this welcome. I am simultaneously humbled and honored to speak to you in memory of Tony Abbott. Tony was my friend and a north star when it came to guiding my development as a teacher and writer—and perhaps more, as a person. I am not the only one for whom this was true and so I say in all seriousness: *We* miss him.

I begin with a remembrance that I have shared on more than one occasion, especially in the time right after his death. Forgive me if I repeat, but this will take me where I need to go. Over the years Tony sat in on several of my courses in the Religion Department at Davidson. The first, sometime in the 1980s, was a course on Jewish and Christian parable literature. On the day we studied Jesus's treasure parable (Mt 13:44), I found myself emphasizing the radical paradox at the heart of this one-sentence narrative: that the man who would claim this treasure hidden in the field must also give up everything, that finding and losing are tangled together in a deep way that this storyteller knew and felt was at the heart of the kingdom of heaven. "Everything" could mean just that: all that we have, an emptying of self that goes beyond the coins in our bag to include status, security, the way we see ourselves in the world—all those things we hold in hand just in case. It is a necessary component of the parable and I hit

it hard, speaking of the parable as no less than a "self-consuming artifact" that finally calls one to give up also the authority of the story. I have no doubt that I did this for nearly the whole fifty-minutes of class. And, as the session was winding down (students were already gathering their things), Tony's voice rang out from the back row: "But what about the joy, Karl, what about the joy?" And then he grinned, the same grin you would remember, as if he were the man in the parable that had just found treasure, a treasure which, though tangled with giving up, required an emptying made in great joy, so much so that one might say that this joy was the treasure itself. To borrow from the American writer John Barth: "the key to the treasure *is* the treasure." For Tony that treasure-key was joy.

The parable says explicitly that the man who finds the treasure gives up everything *in great joy* in order to have it. I was struck then, as I still am, at how easily I had elided joy from the story, something that may reveal more than I need presently to explore about my own proclivities at the time. I felt challenged to learn something about myself in this exchange and what Tony had revealed about himself: that joy was not only a possibility for the worst of us walking around in sandy fields we thought empty, but also the vital necessity. Tony had just testified.

It is but a short step from Tony's question to the apostle Paul's insistence in the Philippians letter, a letter written from prison, that we should "Rejoice in the Lord always." That's a clear enough imperative. Curious then, that Paul adds to it immediately: "I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:8). Why does he have to repeat it? He himself may have created the obstacle with his cross-intoxicated proclamation, but he also may be recognizing the difficulty in what he is commanding them to do. As Paul's Christ-hymn in this letter presents a model of

kenosis or emptying (2:6-11), so must the joyful empty themselves of something easily hoarded. He adds to the list of imperatives: "Do not be anxious about anything" (4:6). Give it up, he seems to say, even if this seems to mean everything (and too often it does). Perhaps the apostle's oddest and yet true follower becomes Franz Kafka, whose policeman replies similarly when asked for direction: "Give it up, give it up," he says, accompanying his words with laughter.[1]

Or, let's go to the precursor of Tony's *Angel Dialogs*, the angels in the gospel of Luke.[2] These are the messengers that scare the wits out of shepherds abiding in their fields, only to voice: "Be not afraid: for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day . . ." (Lk 2:9-10). Such scriptures put joy at odds with a life ordered by anxiety and fear and perhaps then lay their finger on what we find so challenging about joy, if not, in fact miraculous. Somewhere a reader of Paul's letter is saying, I don't think we can do this. The gravity of deeply-entrenched misery that never seems to let up makes Paul seem mad in his request. We can no more rejoice always than we can jump up in the air and stay aloft (and wouldn't it seem morally insensitive to do so in the presence of suffering others?). I don't think we can *do* this, but what if joy is not something that we do (Pauline imperative notwithstanding), but something we find ourselves in or experience when we stop doing all those other things that impede its presence? Closer to the bone, I think, is not the question of the possibility of joy's coming as gift, but our desire for it: do we want it or is it too costly? Well, who wouldn't want it? In a world in which we suffer and die from a lack of joy, I

[1] See Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 456.
[2] Anthony Abbott, *The Angel Dialogs* (Davidson, NC: Lorimer press, 2014).

would suggest that there is something in us that resists it nevertheless—all of us. I'm not sure we want joy, not enough to give up everything for it. But what if that's the only way we can have it?

In these scriptures joy manifests an interruptive force in human lives: the man in the field faces the interruption of the saved-up-for future as he empties his bank account; Paul's audience, if anxious, must contend with the interruption of the nightly monkey-mindedness that spins out of control and haunts with the worst that imaginations can conjure; the shepherds in the field encounter the interruption of empire that dominates and keeps them stuck in a plot not of their own making, an interruption that comes with a birth and thereby a promise that a new beginning is even now making itself available. Surely such interruptions are good news: that you need not secure the future for yourself, that the anxious voices have no lasting power, that one is not stuck in whatever story oppresses or depresses. Good news, except for the way we grow fond of these familiar realities, sometimes manipulating them for our advantage, finding in them a controllable predictability that for all the misery they cause may yet seem preferable to a joy that surprises, that is beyond our power to create of our own accord, and claims us for a freedom that we cannot shrug off with even the genuine protests of fear or desire to be in solidarity with those who have no joy. Easier to roll the eyes with irony at the prospect of joy. Thus, Paul needs to repeat it: "Again I say, rejoice."

Our resistance to joy seems knee-jerked. I would wager big money that none of us doubt another's confession of suffering, but to the report of joy most of us instinctively whisper, "Yeah, I bet" or "we'll see how long this lasts." We are wary of joy, as we are wary of good news that asks something of us. On the one hand, we may resent the joy of others when it

seems remote from our lives or, out of ethical sobriety, put it aside when it would seem insensitive to the misery that roves about too obviously. That last habit has merit but is dangerous in the way it disguises our underlying fear: if joy comes our way, we will need to give up our default position of complaint with which we evade the possibility not only of joy, but responsibility and the freedom of being basically all right. Paul and the angels were correct: joy bumps up against anxiety and fear and sets them in flight; and, at the same time, it is the giving up of anxiety and fear that opens one's life to joy. I doubt we can easily *do* that, but joy might happen to us anyway, like the way salvation arrives and interrupts all else, even the buried conviction that we'd rather die than live in such a full, free way.

Here's how it might happen:

And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear,
Myself I stood in the storm of the bird-cherry tree.
It was all leaflife and starshower, unerring, self-shattering power,
And it was all aimed at me.

What is this dire delight flowering fleeing always earth?
What is being? What is truth?

Blossoms rupture and rapture the air,
All hover and hammer,
Time intensified and time intolerable, sweetness raveling rot.
It is now. It is not.

The poem is Osip Mandelstam's as translated by Christian Wiman.[3] Mandelstam, perhaps the most significant of early 20th century Russian poets, might seem an unlikely candidate for joy, though having already put Paul and Kafka on the list, I won't turn back now. No stranger to

[3] Osip Mandelstam, "And I Was Alive," in Christian Wiman, ed., *Joy: 100 Poems* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2017), 112. Wiman's anthology is not only a rich trove of how modern poets have inflected the experience of joy, but a keen meditation on the complexity and challenge of joy. His introduction, "Still Wilderness," is itself worth the price of admission to the volume.

imprisonment, torture, and exile—he had famously satirized Stalin in one poem and paid for it—Mandelstam wrote in the context of Stalin's purges and was *disappeared* in the gulag of Soviet work camps where he died in 1938. Yet, even here, a moment of joy interrupts that deathly narrative with the astonishing surprise: "And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear." He does not act as much as he is present to what is happening: "Myself I stood in the storm of the bird-cherry tree." Standing there, though, is no small thing in the way it counters fearful inclinations to run from the surprising; standing there, if not everything, is the first step on the path to joy. Standing there takes courage, for as Mandelstam describes it, being present to this stormy blizzard of beauty is "self-shattering." At the same time, I imagine he has little choice, tractor-beamed to a power that has aimed all at him and made him feel not dead but so unimaginably "alive."

Standing there, he is not the agent of this epiphany, but the one who has opened himself up to receiving the "self-shattering" gift of "all [being] aimed at [him]" and the vitality it has brought forth. These, I believe, are the cardinal features of joy: the ways it comes as a gift or surprise and the ways it makes one intensely alive. Mandelstam's language invokes a harsh setting: storms and blizzards, something targeting him. Yet the tempestuousness has no icy chill but brings the overwhelm of grace and beauty, of spring not winter. If he is targeted, it is by the bounty of these same realities that are being brought to him as if "aimed." They are not only "at" him, but *for* him, as he experiences the giving, the gift of the deep sense of being "alive" in the domain veering otherwise toward death.

The experience defies explanation as his questions indicate. Moreover, explanation would be beside the point and at odds with the fullness of this mystery that reaches beyond.

We do not want Mandelstam to explain, but to live, to continue to stand there (and we fear rightly that if he were to start explaining that this would mean the end of any "leaflife" and "starshower"). Still, if he cannot account for the gift, he can name it and, in doing so, humbly bow before it, or even sound its praise: "Time intensified and time intolerable, sweetness raveling rot. / It is now. It is not." His joy is the gift of standing amid time made full, fulfilled to the point and beyond which it can be borne, a glad dying, we might say, to the limits of the mere. This is a reckoning of time in which he surrenders joyfully. A moment which is fully present and yet eternal, now and not. The discovery of a "sweetness [that] [ravels] rot."

If we let Mandelstam's poem furnish a model of joy, it becomes apparent that joy and happiness are not the same. Joy has a profundity and, with Mandelstam, a "self-shattering" that go beyond the niceties of happiness. A moment of joy might change one forever, might feed one, might save one; in contrast, happiness is pleasant, a trinket, but not especially weighty treasure. I wouldn't give up everything for it, but I might for joy. Said another way, as the angels knew, joy gives birth to something novel—something interruptive—that takes one into uncharted territory, into unchartable experience. Joy has no map. As we stand there, like Mandelstam, it transports us to a wilderness that is also our true home.

Thus, Lisel Mueller. A refugee from Nazi Germany as a teenager, Mueller settled with her family in the American Midwest, ultimately winning the National Book Award and, in 1996, the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Her poem, "Joy," evokes joy's power, complexity, and destination.

"Don't cry, it's only music,"
someone's voice is saying.
"No one you love is dying."

It's only music. And it was only spring,
the world's unreasoning body

run amok, like a saint's, with glory,
that overwhelmed a young girl
into unreasoning sadness.
"Crazy," she told herself.
"I should be dancing with happiness."

But it happened again. It happens
when we make bottomless love—
there follows a bottomless sadness
which is not despair
but its nameless opposite.
It has nothing to do with the passing of time.
It's not about loss. It's about
two seemingly parallel lines
suddenly coming together
inside us, in some place
that is still wilderness.
Joy, joy, the sopranos sing,
reaching for the shimmering notes
while our eyes fill with tears.[4]

The voice in Mueller's poem expects happiness, to be "dancing" with it, in fact, but this itself is a source of frustration. Instead, she confronts something less expected and more complex—joy. Joy as occasioned, I would surmise, by sopranos soaring in the high notes of Beethoven's ninth, the ecstatic repetition of *Freude, Freude,* an ode to joy that takes out the wall between chorus and audience. And here she is crying as if someone she loved was dying, even though no one is. Tears of joy, we sometimes say, as if to contrast them with tears of pain or sadness or misery, tears which we more readily understand or are at least familiar with. Yet, Mueller's poem asks us to hold these together as an expression that overflows from the bottomless well where we know the outpouring of both love and sadness at once. "It's not about loss," she says, reminding us that this is not the same thing as poignance or a glimpse of the precious, though

[4] Lisel Mueller, "Joy," in Wiman, 40.

these, too, may make us tear up. “It has nothing to do with the passing of time,” she says as well, forbidding us to tie these tears to the mortality of love, flowers that fade and grass that withers, Margaret in her grove unleaving and all of that. What then are these tears?

Tears come forth when the walls that hold them back give way. Along with Mandelstam, Mueller witnesses joy as a “self-shattering,” a breaking of the self’s armor that lets into our being all and everything: the power of music, of spring, of “the world’s unreasoning body run amok,” the overwhelm; the God-glorying dam-burst of “dappled things,” to invoke Hopkins’ language, the praise-forthing of “pied beauty” in its liberation of “all things counter, original, spare, strange.”[5] Mueller’s joy-tears signify a self that has escaped its leash and roams toward the “place that is still wilderness.” For the joyful self is wild, embracing a bewilderment whose ear-marks are not confusion, but clear recognition that “the parallel lines [have] suddenly [come] together / inside us,” and no longer can we be so sure that giving up everything and discovering treasure are not one and the same. “It’s not about loss,” she says, except in the way perhaps that the lost become found, the way the thing you lost and thought you’d never find again is always yourself. Tony’s revered Frederick Buechner said this was what the Kingdom of God was like and it sounds exactly the right chord.

Joy insists not only that we love as if that Kingdom of God had come, but that we do so with reckless abandon. This joy is not the opposite of sadness, but here, the contrary of a tamed self, bound and limited by its own fear of the possible impossibility. The joyful self is wild and ever heads for a wilderness without emotional walls to hold back tears, that heads for wilderness as for a homecoming, a recovery not of innocence or happiness but of possibility.

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[5] Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford, 1948), 74.

For, in Rebecca Solnit's words, "there is a place where sadness and joy are not distinct, where all emotion lies together, a sort of ocean into which the tributary streams of distinct emotions go, a faraway deep inside."[6] Here the boundaries are not so rigidly drawn nor the options constrained in advance by the anxious-ridden's rules of necessity, a place where one might, a la *Wicked*'s Elphaba, defy gravity. In this way, Mueller suggests, joy is not so much an emotion or a single affect, but the liberation of the self for all emotions and the experiences from which they spring. To live and love wildly. Joy as jailbreak. An exodus into the wilderness where we become free for tears and "sweetness raveling rot." Mandelstam's manna that keeps him alive.

If joy is the answer, perhaps the question is "how do we stay alive?" or better, "why?" For Lucille Clifton, the doyenne of twentieth-century African American poetry, "why" is a question that earns a line all its own. Thus, her poem "hag riding" [7]:

why
is what I ask myself
maybe it is the afrikan in me
still trying to get home
after all these years
but when I wake to the heat of morning
galloping down the highway of my life
something hopeful rises in me
rises and runs me out into the road
and I lob my fierce thigh high
over the rump of the day and honey
i ride I ride

There alone on the initial line of the poem "why" signifies without clear specificity, as if it were the fundamental or underlying question to all else, so basic that it need not be spelled out. If she indicates no reference, her suggestion that "maybe it is the afrikan in me / still trying to get

[6] Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 119.
[7] Lucille Clifton, "hag riding," in Wiman, 12.

home / after all these years" hints at one path we might take. "Why" is the question you raise far from home after years of trying to get back. If she is "still trying to get back," then it is clear as well that she has not been able to complete her return and it has been a long time. Why: An exile's question, we would have to say, striking at the core of what it means to be cut off from whatever precious taproot "home" conveys or simply of the estrangement of no longer being at home with ourselves. Why have we been brought to this spot in the road where things seem alien, heavy, and stale, and where do we go from here? How do we persist?

Clifton's "why" does not find a direct answer. Instead, her poem offers something like testimony, the witness of what happens *nevertheless*. So much depends on that adversative conjunction "but." We have the years of trying, seemingly to no end, and then we have something else: *but* then this. Something else notwithstanding, something regardless of the gravities that would nail her to her place in barren fields of alien corn. The years of trying but then the "heat of the morning" arrives—no, more vividly, the morning comes "galloping" at her—and she "wakes" to it. You can almost hear her channel Mandelstam and say: "*And I was alive in* the heat of morning / galloping down the highway of my life—*and it was all aimed at me.*" This heat whose energy stirs her like horse-hooves racing is not of her own making any more than Mandelstam manufactures his "leafshower." She wakes to a reality that aims at her and counters the downpress of gravity with "something hopeful ris[ing]." If Mandelstam stood struck, Clifton finds herself running to the road, running not *from* but *toward* and *with* the momentum that will carry her away and forward and beyond to a destination neither disclosed nor as significant as the wild motion itself. Carried away with the reckless abandon of joy—we might put it just this way.

She does consent in a vivid way to continue the day's forward motion. Unforgettably, she "lob[s] her fierce thigh high / over the rump of day"—here, the reckless abandon—and rides. She persists into the "nevertheless" of day, joining the girth of her body to day's own, becoming one with its motion. But we must go back exactly to how she puts it: "honey / i ride I ride." The utterance "honey" is nearly everything, and is again "sweetness raveling the rot." The colloquial vocative conveys affection for the hearer but, even more, announces that what words follow are worth hearing (and you better believe it), that what she is going to say can only be spoken with enthusiasm and the unbridled joy of the revelation: "i ride i ride." She might have stopped the poem with "Honey," and I believe that pronounced in the way I hear her voice, it would have satisfied. But she asks us to consider this final image of her riding. Said twice, it is a figure of determination and insistence; it affirms what she is doing and will continue to do even as it recognizes the gift of its possibility. She will not deny nor be denied her day. To where does she ride? It may not make a difference to the one carried away in the vitality of heat and gallop. Yet, we might also envision her riding in the direction of a home once lost and now in the process of being found. "Honey," I hear to say, "let me tell you where the treasure lies buried." Who could resist? Who could not take this as an invitation to joy, to ride toward that place where we are most fully at home?

In March 1990, Lucille Clifton read at Davidson. She read from *two-headed woman* in the old 900 Room, now the well-appointed auditorium of the Sloan Music building, but back then a dark, long, low-lit space with a stage best suited for folk-music performances which were common enough on the weekends. In that venue, she could do casual which is to say she had a natural ease when she read, did not stand on pretense, and related to everyone in a personal

way, as if we were at a church picnic. At the same time, she stood before us with remarkable dignity and bearing, reading brief, short-lined poems in a manner that let every word claim its due. Poetry is like that, of course, and short poems even more so. Thus, I should not have been surprised when I took up my copy of *two-headed woman* for her to sign and she inscribed it with a one-word poem. “To Karl,” she wrote. “Joy!” and then signed her name.

Joy. Exclamation point. Can it be punctuated in any other way? Actually, that is a real question. Without the exclamation point, do we not encounter something less than joy. Do we not need the exclamation point in the same way we need Clifton’s luxuriant “Honey” to remind us that, when it comes to joy, much depends on how we say it. That is, does not joy finally issue in a poetry that is known by its way of speaking more than from what is said? Joy is the free, fearless abandon that puts the exclamation in whatever we give ourselves to say, the volume and tone in the sound of “Honey,” and the resonance in the music that brings forth tears. Her inscription, in my eyes, would not have been any poorer had she only drawn a vertical line with a bouncy dot beneath it. A gesture of dash and verve.

But she wrote what she wrote and now I ponder it seriously: Joy! As a one-word poem in *two-headed woman* it testifies to her experience that joy is, indeed, a possibility and that she certifies its reality with the signing of her name. More, as the sole word she writes in the inscription, she reminds me that joy is not only possible, but vital—that apart from this, there will not be anything else worth saying, no treasure to find. And more still, her word of witness sounds as an apostolic imperative, rejoice always (exclamation point). Again, I say rejoice. We do not have the power to make it happen, but we ever have the power to let joy come forth, to

stand before it with awe, to cry shamelessly in its presence, or simply to get on its back and ride, ride, ride.

And now I hear from the back of the room the echo of my friend asking, “But Karl, what about the joy?” I hope these comments today might be the start of an answer to his question, or at least a sign that I have heard what he asked and have been listening to it over the years. Tony would have tolerated a lecture on the subject, such as this one, and he was always kind in that regard. But, at the end of that class, perhaps the answer he sought was more along the lines of Clifton’s one-word poem in my book. Without denying anything I had said about the parable’s radical surrenderings, could I also say, as he could, “Joy” and add the exclamation point? Could I add the exclamation point and the grin that showed how deeply he understood and embraced this reality in which we come to know our greatest treasure?

“Shield the joyous,” an Episcopal collect offers, along with intercession for the weary, the afflicted, and the dying. This, we pray, for joy is precious and rare, fragile, yet abiding in the memory of those whose hearts uttered forth with courage “and I was alive.” Those who kept before us the undeniable possibility. Those who insist: “but what about the joy?” Shield them, Lord Christ.