“The Joy of Holiness”

(45 minutes)

**Introduction:**

* Good morning everyone! As has already been mentioned, my name is Sister Marie Fidelis. I am a member of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ Religious Community. I have been in religious life for 11 years. I currently serve and work as Administrator at The Ark and The Dove Retreat Center in Pittsburgh, PA, where I have been since 2020.
* I was invited to come today to speak with you about JOY. The Joy of Holiness, and the Joy of the Spirit.
* Often, people see religious sisters today and say, “You are so joyful!” and sometimes the next remark is, “I wish I had that joy.”
* Today, I want to explore that joy with you. What is joy? Is it for me? Am I a bad person if I don’t feel joyful all the time?
* As we journey through today together, I am going to invite you to put your walls down and just receive. I am sure all of you have various things on your mind today- some good things that you are looking forward to, some difficult things, maybe even painful situations that you carry in the hidden places of your hearts. I want to be very reverent towards each of your hearts today. I want to invite us to just take a few moments now in silence to put ourselves in the presence of God.
  + Allow a few moments of silence.
  + Read a psalm?? (Psalm 51?)
  + Invitation to surrender the pains into the hands of the Lord.
* **Invitation**- Throughout the day, I am going to invite you to be attentive to what is happening in your heart. There are three voices I want you to be listening for. My voice- what I am saying to you. YOUR voice- what is happening in your heart. God’s voice- what is the voice of the Spirit saying to you as you listen to me?

**What is joy?**

* This morning’s session is on “The joy of holiness”. But before we can begin anywhere. We should probably define our terms! I am going to define two terms for you right now. Joy and Holiness. What is **Joy**?
* According Merriam Webster Dictionary: **Joy**: To experience great pleasure or delight
  + Also: “The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.”
* It can certainly seem that when you see someone who has success, or good fortune, they have joy! But is that an authentic interpretation of joy? Is that the joy of holiness?
* Can you share with me some suggestions of a definition of joy? Ask for responses
* I want to share with you a definition of joy that I found several years ago. It is from Pope Francis’ Encyclical, “The Joy of the Gospel.” This is what he says:
  + #5. “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.”
  + I want to highlight this: “Joy is born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.”
* Take a moment to reflect on that and allow that to sink into your hearts.
* Isn’t that a different stance to “Joy means I put a smile on and fake my way through the day to prove I am a good Christian and I love Jesus”?
* **Joy is born of our personal certainty that I am infinitely loved**. No matter what storm, challenge, or trial comes, I am rooted in the truth that I am infinitely loved by Jesus.

**So what does this have to do with holiness?**

What is “The Joy of Holiness”?

* Holiness is another term that we should probably define.
* I wont even read you the Merriam Webster definition of holiness- it was completely unhelpful.
* This is the definition from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:
  + **2013**"All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity." All are called to holiness: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that . . . doing the will of the Father in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor.
* Holiness is truly the process of our transformation into Jesus Christ, through the Sacraments and through a personal relationship with Him.
* Holiness is becoming more and more like Jesus each day.

**A quick challenge**

* I just want to pause here for a moment and ask a question- Catholic Charismatic Renewal, do we focus enough on personal holiness? Does our charismatic spirituality lead to transformation in our souls so that we look more like Jesus each day?
* Baptism in the Holy Spirit lead sus to proclaim “Jesus is Lord!” – but not only to proclaim it, BHS enables us to live that truth, that “Jesus is Lord!”
* In my 2nd talk, I will share more about Joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. But in THIS talk, I want to talk about joy as a fruit of personal conversion and holiness.

**So what is holiness?**

* Holiness is communion with Jesus. A union of hearts with Jesus.
  + Our fulfillment of holiness will be in heaven, when we are totally integrated. We are totally healed and whole and have become totally filled with the God who is Love. Then, we will have perfect joy.
* But what is the process of holiness on this earth? How do we actually become transformed to have this deep union with Jesus?
* Before the fall, man was perfectly whole, perfectly integrated. Our mind, body, and soul, and will, were all perfectly in accord with God’s will and in perfect relationship with Him and with one another. Imagine: perfect, total harmony.
* When man sinned, a terrible thing happened- disunity. Disunity within ourselves, with others, and with God. Inside each of us, we experience “concupiscence.” This is the tendency to choose **evil** instead of good. And I am sure that we feel that!
* CCC on distrust?
* The good news- the GREAT news- is that Jesus Christ is SO madly in love with us that He left His holy throne in heaven to come and destroy Satan- and to offer us salvation.
* As baptized Christians, our DAILY life is about living in love with Jesus and choosing to live in salvation. That is where our joy comes from!
* As Catholic people who believe in Jesus, our daily life is an invitation from Jesus to **receive** the grace He offers to us.
* To the extent that we grow in relationship with Him, we become more and more like him, more and more in communion with Jesus.

So, what is the joy of holiness?

* I am going to propose that the joy of holiness = the joy of conversion!
* Joy is a fruit of our personal conversion to Jesus Christ.
* As we come to know Jesus, through the Sacraments, through the Scripture, through personal prayer, we start so become more like Him.
* We also start to see the ways that we are NOT like Him. We start to see some of the wounds that we carry, some of the ways we choose our will instead of God’s will. We start to see our sin. And that can be super painful!!
* What do we do when that happens? What do we do in our spiritual life when we start to see places where we need conversion?
* There are several options, but the two most obvious ones are: 1. Ask Jesus for the grace and begin a process of healing and conversion, or 2. Deny it, close our hearts, and bury it so we do not experience the pain. Sometimes, we have a mix of both.
* It is only through conversion that we can have authentic holiness; and it is only through conversion that we can have long-lasting authentic joy.

**Conversion is about Relationship**

* Every sin fractures our communion with Jesus, our relationship with Him. Not only that, it fractures the unity inside of ourselves. It wounds us.
* As we begin the process of becoming healed and whole, of interiorizing the Gospel, receiving the Love of Jesus through the Sacraments, we start to become more joyful! We start to live in the certainty of being infinitely loved.
* Joy is to know that we are infinitely loved- and we can only know that if we are in a relationship with the LOVER, the one who loves us infinitely. Joy comes from a relationship with the Lover.

I am going to take a pause here. I just threw a lot at you!

I want to share with you my personal testimony. People often say to me, “You must have a charism of joy.” Or “You are so joyful.” And then make some pretty big conclusions, such as: “You must have always been faithful.” “You must come from a family where you know you are loved.” Etc.

Share my Testimony

In my story, it wasn’t until I said “YES” to God’s will that the grace came.

We said earlier that holiness is personal conversion. Joy is a fruit of that process of conversion, of living in relationship with Jesus, of dwelling in unity with Him.

**But what keeps us from growing in relationship with Him?**

The American dream seems pretty promising as the fullness of life, the fullness of joy. What about in perfect health? If I could only have perfect health, I will be fully alive! Or maybe, if all my kids come back to Church, then I could be fully alive. Is that what will bring God the most glory? Is that where I will find total joy and happiness?

This morning, I shared with you about Encounter with Jesus. The power of our first encounter, and also the power of our daily encounter with Jesus. But, after our encounter, how do we continue to grow, and live fully alive? I shared in my testimony that, after my first encounter with Jesus, things did not get any easier! I knew I was loved by God- but I wasn’t immediately transformed into heavenly glory!

How do we live in the vision of God? How do we become fully alive? How do we take hold of Jesus’ promise to have life in abundance?

I want to share with you a term called “inner healing.” Many of you may have heard this phrase before, and may be well versed in guiding others through inner healing. But, I want to invite us to enter into this time together exploring where in our hearts we may need healing.

What prevents us from living fully alive? That is, what prevents us from living our life in joy of holiness? The life of looking at Jesus, and letting Jesus look at us. We can imagine God our loving Father, and what keeps our gaze away from Him? Is it shame? Sin? A particularly embarrassing moment that you wish you could take away? Is it doubt? Is it feeling unloved? Is it a false image of who God is? For each of us, we have a story of our lives which is totally unique, totally personal- and God wants to meet us in our story.

Have you ever had guests over to your house- either expected or unexpected- and had a particular room or place that you did NOT want them to see? Either a junk closet, or a room with a mess, or some other apparent flaw in the house that you didn’t want them to see? Just last week, I was welcoming a retreatant to The Ark and The Dove. I had sort of expected her, but she hadn’t confirmed her reservation, so we were “sort of prepared,” but in the midst of the business of the day, I had not quite gotten around to double-checking her room. When the doorbell rang, I nervously looked at Jackie and said, “Do I have a room ready?” knowing that all the rooms were cleaned by a group of college students last week… Which, I am sure they did a great job, but they missed a few spots! Anyway, I was taking the woman to her room, and I picked the room on the farthest corner of the house, all the way on the top floor… And she was so delighted to see her room! Her back was facing the room, and she was telling me how wonderful it was to be at The Ark and The Dove, her long journey from California, etc- and over her shoulder I saw that there was no pillowcase on the bed! Of course, then I start thinking… how can I subtly navigate her back downstairs, get her talking to somebody else, so I can run back and make this room presentable? I would hate for her to see that we missed that detail! I would hate for her to think we are sloppy. I would hate for her to think that I don’t know what I am doing… So I managed to slip her back down the stairs, pass her off to another conversation, and dash up the stairs to make her room presentable.

How often we do that with God? We are like, “God, welcome! I am so glad you are here. But… I’m not quite prepared… let me show you something else in my house, while I frantically try to clean up this detail that I don’t want you to see! Please, come look at my updated kitchen cabinets, while I go make sure pillowcases are on the bed. Oops- please go sip my perfectly crafted homemade lemonade on the back porch, while I vacuum up the dog hair!” and on and on…

What are those “unpresentable” places in our lives, in our hearts, that we do not want God to see? What are the unpresentable places where we try desperately to keep the Holy Spirit OUT, instead of inviting Him in?

I want to share with you some suggestions of what those places might look like in our souls, knowing that each of us has a unique story, and places where we do NOT invite the Holy Spirit. These areas may be unconverted sin; unforgiveness; a lie in our identity; a memory we can’t manage to forget; a quality of our personality that is embarrassing; a person we can’t manage to avoid; an addiction that we are still wondering how to treat; a desire that we think is unholy.

As we close this session together, I want to invite us to just close our eyes for a few moments, and find that place in our hearts where we struggle to look at Jesus, or, where we say, “JESUS! Please don’t look at this…” “The glory of God is man fully alive, but the life of man is the vision of God.” Where is the place in your heart where you say, “HOLY SPIRIT, DO NOT LOOK AT THIS! Holy Spirit, you are NOT invited here…”

* One major obstacle to joy and conversion is unforgiveness.
* Forgiveness can be for little things or for big things; towards others, ourselves, and even God.
* I once heard a quote that struck me deeply- “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison, and expecting the other person to die.”
* Our unforgiveness towards another person hurts and damages US, more than it damages the other person. If anything, the other person can move on with their lives, while we are being buried alive by our own unforgiveness.
* We can give entire talks on forgiveness and the importance of it, but here I just want to highlight that unforgiveness is often a place where we try to keep the Holy Spirit away. When is the last time you thought of someone who you were really mad at, and said, “Holy Spirit, come see how mad I am!” Usually, we try to separate God from those spaces in our heart where we cannot forgive. However, it will be so much easier and swifter if we just “get to the point” and show the Holy Spirit.
* In order to live fully alive in Christ, we MUST take our vision and cast it on Him. I would like to say that forgiveness is NOT just saying, “Oh, that didn’t matter.” Really, it DID matter! But, sometimes, our vision gets stuck somewhere other than Jesus.
* We get stuck looking at the **wound**. We get stuck looking at the **damage** that was caused. We get stuck staring at the **person** with distain. We get stuck looking at the **ground** in shame. We get stuck looking in the mirror with resentment.
* Brothers and sisters, let us put our gaze back on Jesus. Yes, those things matter. Jesus so tenderly wants to hold the wound, and your heart, and the damage done- but your staring at it is not helping! Let us turn our eyes back to Jesus and tell HIM- “Jesus, I want my heart to heal. I choose to forgive.”

We are going to close this time together with a meditation. It is about 20 minutes long. I want to invite you to settle into your chair, put anything down that is in your hands, and just open your heart to receive the peace of Jesus Christ.

This is presented by Sister Miriam James, SOLT.