

We Find Joy In Connection

Luke 1:24-45

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

December 8, 2024

Back in the year 2000, Robert Putnam, a Public Policy Research professor at Harvard University published a book entitled, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. By gathering data from a wide range of sources, Putnam recognized a concerning trend in American public life. Since the 1960's, our participation in all sorts of civic and social activities had been steadily declining. From bridge clubs to the VFW, high school marching bands to local Rotary clubs, once popular organizations where people came together to build relationships, enjoy a common interest, or participate in volunteer efforts were fading away. It wasn't so much that established members were dropping out but that new, younger members weren't joining. People were becoming increasingly socially isolated, choosing not to participate in groups where they might build social connections. Putnam's concern was that decreasing participation in social groups would be bad for our individual physical and mental health and would lead to increasing polarization in our country.

Fast forward twenty-three years, and it seems he was right. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on our epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The number of people reporting that they feel socially isolated has soared across all demographics but especially among older adults and younger adults. Studies have shown that social isolation is as bad for your health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Loneliness can contribute to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, cognitive decline, diabetes, and a host of other health problems. Meanwhile, data from 148 studies point to social connection increasing the odds of survival by 50%.

Meanwhile, our social activities also create the social fabric of our country. In places like the bowling alley, a knitting class, Kiwanis, or a book club, we build relationships beyond our usual circle. We discover we have things in common. We network. And all of that leads us to shared concern for each other and our country.

As we make our way through this Advent season, we are contemplating a line from the wonderful Christmas carol, "O Holy Night" by asking the question "How does a weary world rejoice?" We've all experienced some weariness over the last few years, let alone the last few months. Yet, Advent is a season characterized by joy. How do we find that joy when so much is draining our energy? The story of Elizabeth and Mary's meeting suggests that one way to find joy is through connection.

Last week, we heard about the angel telling Zechariah that his aging wife, Elizabeth, would soon be pregnant with a very important child, John the Baptist. Now, it is some five months later, and Mary has also received a visit from the angel, announcing that she is pregnant, too. Though very young and not yet married, she will soon give birth to the son of God.

So, here we have these two women in vastly different stages of life. Yet, they both find themselves unexpectedly pregnant. Scripture tells us that Elizabeth went into seclusion for five months after learning her good news. We don't really know why. Perhaps she was afraid of losing the baby or wanted to avoid the stares and gossip of her neighbors. Given her age, maybe

it was a difficult pregnancy or maybe she, like her husband, Zechariah, had questions and doubts. Like Zechariah last week, we can imagine her internal dialogue. “I have been trying to have a child for decades and NOW I get pregnant? Does God realize just how old I am? I am weary to the bones. How can I rejoice in this news?”

Meanwhile, Mary might well have had some similar questions. “Does God realize just how young I am? And what a risk this is? I could end up getting stoned to death for being pregnant outside of marriage. And what about Joseph? He will undoubtedly send me away - or worse. How can I rejoice in this news?”

What they discover is that connecting with each other is what leads them to rejoice. Mary makes the long journey by foot to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. She probably traveled alone, and we can imagine her relief when she arrives. Most people read this story and focus on Mary, assuming she has gone to see Elizabeth to find support and a safe place to retreat until closer to the baby’s birth. Yet, it is Elizabeth who responds with joy when Mary shows up at her door.

Scripture tells us, “when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

Until now, Elizabeth has not connected with anyone. She hasn’t had a circle of women to answer her questions about pregnancy. She hasn’t had the help of her mother during the early days of morning sickness. She has been alone. Rev. Lisle Garrity writes, “perhaps Mary’s arrival is what pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion, allowing her to experience joy and delight.”

When have you experienced that in your life - a time when you were especially lonely, sad, or weary - and connecting with someone else - a neighbor, a friend, someone at church - suddenly pulled you out of your funk? Maybe they showed you some special kindness or they made you laugh or they listened as you shared some of what was on your heart. Maybe you shared a common experience that connected you or worked toward a common goal. We have a tremendous gift to offer each other just with our presence.

The other lesson about joy from Elizabeth and Mary’s story is that joy is contagious. Here they are, each in the midst of her own fears and doubts, yet when they come together they rejoice for each other. And that joy spreads. When Elizabeth shouts for joy and her baby leaps for joy, Mary bursts into a song of joy and anticipation.

There is something about being seen and understood, something about laughing or crying, working and worshipping together that is healing for us. We don’t function well in isolation. We need bridge nights and bowling tournaments, social clubs and church, because it is when we are together that joy flourishes.

One of my few positive memories from the pandemic is how when we were all forced into isolation, people tried so hard to connect with each other. More people said hello to me when I was out for a walk than did before or have since. People wrote messages to strangers with sidewalk chalk. They had drive-by birthday and graduation parties. They sang together from

their balconies or on the internet, had family holiday celebrations on zoom and visited each other outside - even in the coldest weather. We all took care of each other because we realized how much we need each other. And in those new ways of connecting, we found joy.

Sadly, over time we seemed to stop. Rather than making our circles bigger, we made them smaller. The tendency of Americans to avoid social groups was already there and just got more and more exaggerated by the pandemic. And many of us are still recovering.

Yet, I believe that seeking out joy in the company of others, finding our own joy and helping others find theirs, is something we all need more of. I believe it is something we can do and, in fact, must do. For ourselves, our bodies, our hearts and spirits. For our neighbors and friends and families. For our workplaces and our schools and our country.

And church is a great place to start. Just yesterday, I went to the church's Advent Tea. It was a wonderful morning of 90 or so women, ranging in age from teenager to octogenarian, came together to center ourselves as we enter into Advent. There were women who don't go to our church; people I didn't know. Others I hadn't seen in months or more. Old friends reunited. Longtime friends sharing memories of the past and hopes for the future. As part of the program, Deirdre Spencer spoke about joy - particularly the joy she has found in singing both at Green Wood and in the Chancel Choir. She has made friends that way - friends who share her love of music but are also just kind, good people she can walk with, laugh with, and enjoy spending time with. People who have added beauty and texture to her life.

Church is a place where you can make life-giving connections. Sing in the choir. Join a committee. Take a class. Start a book club or a small group. Volunteer with the children or youth. Participate in outreach.

God made us for connection. God made us for joy. Our part is to reach out and grab it.

May it be so. Amen.