

This Joy That I Have: A Personal Reflection of Joy in the Midst of Grief

Rev. Angela Whitenhill, LCSW

NBA Mental Health Initiative Manager

Advent 2018



It seems as if Christmas, unlike other holidays, is so much more embedded with social and financial expectations, that instead of feeling the joy of the season, many of us feel disconnected and stressed. In fact, a common symptom of grief is feeling numb or avoidant of familiar festivities that were once enjoyable. Regardless of when our loss occurred, or what type of loss we had, it is very common to feel the effects of that loss during the holiday season. Which is all the more reason to acknowledge and talk openly about our real experiences this holiday season - knowing that in the spirit of Advent, the living God can reach us wherever we truly are.

I've come to learn this truth intimately. Despite so much to be grateful for, I will be holding the grief of miscarriage this holiday season. A loss so common, yet so unacknowledged in our society, I really didn't know how to make sense of it all when it happened. I've learned every miscarriage is different. Every story of pregnancy, and the physical and spiritual journey of becoming a parent, is different. But what seems to be a common thread for those who've been in my shoes is the awkward and sometimes uncomfortable relationship one has with joy after loss. Having experienced the pure rush of excitement and the identity-altering news of pregnancy, only to hear it would not be so, seemed to leave a void larger than the small seed of hope it formed in.

However, the incredible joy that comes when witnessing the movement of God in the midst of tragedy is one of the most beautiful and costly gifts I've ever received: a priceless knowing that can never be unknown. So how does one find or maintain joy in the midst of grief, loss, and heartbreak? The opportunities are endless. Here are a few revelations I've come to through my own grief journey. I encourage you to share your own.

I found listening to the stories of others with similar experiences incredibly helpful and comforting. With each authentic story, I learned simple truths that would serve as permission for me to be honest and open with myself. Some people shared their ambivalence with the loss of their child, while others shared their acceptance of it. Some talked about their honest anger, fears, and shame, while others spoke of their gratitude.

With each transparent conversation, I felt the gain of deeper connection with another. The gift of feeling intimate solidarity with unexpected souls in the thick of my loss began sparking a deep joy I had never experienced before.

It was a solemn yet sturdy joy. Unshakable and fortified through memories of divine healing from past heartbreaks. It was a joy that wasn't necessarily an intense emotional feeling of glee or happiness, but more like a gas stove burner with a small, constant flame resting on low heat. Flickering dimly underneath my sorrow as a reminder of a joy I once knew, and a sign of future jubilation to come. If faith is the substance of what is hoped for and the evidence of what is not seen, then joy for me was the cord I held onto when the wound was so fresh, that having faith felt like three steps ahead of where my soul could be.

Joy was a consistent anchor of sorts. A sense of peace despite the fear I battled that I wouldn't be able to bear children. A sense of respect and love for my body in the midst of it seemingly failing me. A sense of liberating humor revived by loved ones who knew a light heart would help counter my heavy one. I found joy in the wildest of places and people and in the presence of each moment when I looked hard enough. You will, too.

My training as a mental health professional and clergy gave me so much knowledge about grief and mental wellness. However, through my own experience of grief, it became clear that life-altering lessons of joy would sustain my mind and soul in ways no other forms of coping would. I realized that joy, like so many of the fruits of the spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22, truly is an ever-present gift, just waiting to be discovered, digested, and shared. It is our right as children of God to experience joy, an available and freely gift given to all—regardless. Unlike happiness, we can't achieve it, or conjure it up. It is just there for us when we need it and always present when the Holy Spirit is near.

I learned that joy is more complex and versatile than we often give it credit for. Found deeply rooted in gratitude and the awareness of the Divine's movement in our lives, joy can be found regardless of our circumstances and is available to us despite them. I've learned joy does not change our circumstance. Instead, it transforms our experience of them. Joy is just one of the ways the spirit meets us, hold us, and ministers to us in the midst of our circumstance. Accepting joy's function was the beginning of my ability to experience it in the depths of my grief. And when I began to feel hope in the midst of powerlessness, faith in the midst of fear, light-heartedness in the midst of a sorrow, and peace in the midst of pain, I realized quickly the truth of the old gospel song that declares, "This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me, and the world can't take it away!"

Joy didn't make me happy. It made me strong. And as my moment of mourning continues to take its lengthy course, the joy of the Lord continues to be my strength—that low-burning, flickering flame, reminding me of what God has already done, and is planning to do in joys to come.



***Rev. Angela Whitenhill** is the Mental Health Initiative Manager of the National Benevolent Association. She is a licensed clinical social worker, adjunct faculty at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social work, and clergy activist known for organizing in such a way that pays close attention to the nuanced intersections of social identity, religious belief, and mental health. Active in her congregation, Covenant Christian Church, Angela co-leads racial justice efforts through Community in the Heart of Christ, as well as co-leads an affirming LGBTQ+ Christian Support Group through Sanctuary, a non-profit organization that helps churches and individuals welcome LGBTQ+ community through conversations, worship and story.*

*With hopes to support the prioritization of mental health and wellness in the life of the church, the **Mental Health Initiative** aims to establish the necessary awareness and understanding required to counter stigma and change the landscape of conversation regarding mental illness and disorders within the church. Learn more at www.nbacares.org/mental-health.*