

Breathe and Push

December 11, 2022

A couple of weeks ago, the New York Times ran an article about freudenfreude. It's a made-up word, supposed to be the opposite of schadenfreude, the German word for the perverse pleasure folks often get at the misfortune of others. You know, being pleased when something goes wrong, especially for someone you don't like. Freudenfreude is the joy we have when someone else succeeds, and social scientists say it can serve as "glue," holding us together.

Erica Weize of Harvard University says that "sharing in someone else's joy can foster resilience, improve life satisfaction and help people cooperate during a conflict." While schadenfreude can feel good, it can actually reduce our empathy and self-esteem. Freudenfreude, on the other hand, can help moderately depressed people and help us to feel compassion. Freudenfreude – joy at others' joy – is good for us.

I lift all of this up today as churches around the world light the pink candle of joy on our Advent wreaths. Celebrating and cultivating joy is a faith commitment. In a world in which there is so much grief and pain and violence – so much that doesn't bring joy – committing ourselves to celebrating not only our own joy but reveling in others' joy is countercultural.

AND, because our church holds our Christmas Pageant on one of the Sundays of Advent, I always end up trying to combine the themes of two of the Sundays of Advent: joy and love. Love in this context isn't romantic love or even familial love, it's how we strive to model God's love for us and the world.

Valerie Kaur is a lawyer who became a self-proclaimed activist after 9/11. She's a woman of Sikh descent, and after 9/11 became painfully aware of the increasing racism in our country. A dear family friend of hers was one of the first instances of a hate-crime murder linked to that awful tragedy. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a man her family called "uncle," was brutally murdered in front of his store by someone who said that their motivation was that they were a patriot.

What's powerful here is that this murder of someone she held dear motivated Kaur to dedicate her life to the expansion of love. Kaur tells story after story of race-based aggression toward her and her community, but it is in the deep pain she feels seeing her toddler son being the target of white supremacy that she finds what I think is the most powerful imagery for love. She tells of her four-year-old son coming home from an outing with her father, on which a woman on a crowded ferry boat had sneered at them, "Go back to the country you came from."

Because Kaur's father is hard of hearing, the four-year-old had to tell his grandpa what the mean lady was yelling.

She says that the only other time she ever felt this much pain was when she was giving birth. She says, "The final stage of labor is the most painful. The body expands to 10 centimeters, the contractions come so fast there is barely time to breathe. It feels like dying. It is called transition." During Kaur's transition, she says that she remembers the midwife saying that she could see the baby's head, but all she could feel was pain like none other she'd ever experienced.

She turned her head toward her mother and said, “I can’t!” Her mother had her hand on her forehead. She was whispering in her ear, “You are brave. You are brave.” And like a vision, she saw her grandmother standing behind her mother, and her mother behind her, and her mother behind her. A long line of women who had pushed through the fire before her. She took a breath. She pushed. Her son was born. She points out that the stage called transition feels like dying, but it is the stage that precedes the birth of new life.

She goes on to merge her pain, the physical pain of childbirth and the psycho-social pain and fear as her four-year-old is already experiencing racial violence and invites us into seeing the darkness our world is experiencing right now not as the darkness of the tomb, but rather as the darkness of the womb.

And this, friends, is where we find the true depth of the Advent season. What we’re preparing for, the reason the church goes all out for this holiday, isn’t to mark the historical Jesus’ birthday. It’s to birth God’s ways of being into the world. The darkness we are experiencing is so very real. “We are seeing the rise of far rightwing supremacist movements in this nation and around the world, propping up demagogues, mainstreaming nativism, undermining democracies and politicizing the very notion of truth” and we are at a crossroads.

Will we devolve into further civil war, or will we birth something new and beautiful? The only way that the story ends well is if we, ALL OF US, show up with love. Not Hallmark Channel, cozy-peppermint-latte-by-the-fire love, but fierce love willing to endure unfathomable pain to bring about a new reality love.

Our Gospel reading today tells the Christmas story from Joseph’s perspective. We hear of a man who has just learned that his fiancé is pregnant and not by him. At minimum, his ego is bruised. The practice of the day is that he would have her stoned to death, a fate that unmarried pregnant people still face in many places. But a messenger of God tells him not to dismiss her, but rather to take her into his home and name the child “God Saves.”

- God saves.
- God saves this pregnant person with a suspect past?
- God saves this man from making the mistake of his life?
- God saves these people from the brutal social conventions that would have doubled down on pain and brokenness instead of leaning into joy and love?

The messenger of God tells Joseph to see Mary’s predicament not as the darkness of the tomb but rather as the darkness of the womb. It’s interesting, our passage from Isaiah speaks of all number of impossible things happening, “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”

God’s intent isn’t for brokenness and destruction and oppression and violence. God’s intent is for things to work, for joy and love. But for joy and love to rule the day, it takes all of us showing up, all of us practicing Godly ways rather than the ways of destruction.

Valerie Kaur, the Sikh woman who I've been citing so much today, names three commitments for making the darkness we're in the darkness of the womb rather than the tomb, for making love our true north, our guiding star. The first practice is to "see no stranger." We are all interconnected and interdependent. All of the great religions have some teaching along these lines. Here at Union, for the last two years we've been centering ourselves around the phrase, "love your neighbors...no exceptions."

This is the first practice – that everyone, even those we dislike or do not know are our God-given neighbors. To bring this perspective home, Kaur asks "Who have you not yet grieved with? Because who you grieve with, who you sit with and weep with determines who you organize with and who you will fight for."

Isn't that powerful?

The second practice of birthing love is tending to the wound. "It's tempting to see our opponents as evil, but I have learned that there are no such things as monsters in this world, only human beings who are wounded, people whose insecurities or anxieties or greed or blindness cause them to hurt us. Our opponents – the terrorist, the fanatic, the demagogues in office – are people who don't know what else to do with their insecurity but to hurt us, to pull the trigger, or cast the vote, or pass the policy aimed at us. But if some of us begin to listen to their stories, we begin to hear beneath the slogans and sound bites. We begin to understand how to defeat the cultural norms and institutions that radicalize them. Loving our opponents is not just moral, it is pragmatic. It is strategic. It focuses us not just on removing bad actors, but birthing a new world for all of us."

Tending to the wound has two components:

- tending to our own woundedness; that is, making sure our own grief and rage and pain don't turn into violence and toxicity
- as well as tending to our opponents' wounds, for it is in seeking to understand the unresolved grief and rage in others that we will be able to labor with God in the transformation of society.

The third practice of birthing love is to breathe and push. That is, to take time for replenishment and nourishment at regular intervals then to work as hard as we can and then to repeat. Breathe and push.

Breathing, doing self care, engaging in freudenfreude (joy at others' joy), is essential to the healing of the world. Allowing ourselves respite isn't a luxury. It's critical to having the energy and the perspective to continue the labor. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote some of his most powerful work in Jamaica. The scriptures tell us repeatedly of Jesus taking time away to pray regularly. This is part of why I really work hard to keep my Sabbath – a day of rest.

But, of course, nothing comes of labor if we don't push, if we don't do the hard work to birth a new reality.

Friends, we're rounding the corner on Advent. Christmas will be here before we know it. But the birth of Christ that we are being invited to prepare for is so much more profound than the anniversary of a child taking their first breath in a manger. For joy and love to rule the day, it's going to take seeing the other as God's beloved, it's going to take tending to our own wounds and recognizing that violence and oppression are unresolved wounds in others, and it's going to take us both pushing and taking time to breathe.

This is how God will be born anew, when we, like Joseph and Mary, lean into love and the ways of love with our entire beings.

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

<https://bioneers.org/valarie-kaur-breathe-push-labor-revolutionary-love-zstf1911/?fbclid=IwAR2r3qhKfax-emGxlZnebstOrobzUKdb0EwHxPaxi6kHCSC0rwoDFmmmceQ>

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