

“A Question We Would Rather Not Raise” April 25, 2021  
Acts 5:25-42 Westminster, Greenville  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Ben Dorr

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Jennifer Senior wrote a book on parenting a number of years ago with the paradoxical title: *All Joy and No Fun*.

The most insightful part of her work, in my opinion, comes when she talks about the expectations that so many modern parents now place on their kids. She describes how—100 years ago—kids were primarily a source of income for the family.

They worked on the farm.  
They worked in the factory.

What parents wanted—no, needed—from their children was for them to work and bring money home.

Today, as we all know, it’s very different.  
Senior says that children have gone from being “our employees to our bosses.”

Parents spend more time with their kids than ever before these days. And this was BEFORE the pandemic and e-learning came along!

There are also more books available than EVER BEFORE about what parents are supposed to do to raise the good kid, the successful kid, the well-adjusted kid, the fluent-in-Mandarin kid....

And yet, with all this advice out there,  
Senior’s research has shown her that the one mantra that no parent seems to question these days, that so many parents seem to agree on, is this:

“All I want is for my children to be happy.”

She goes on to say, “Happiness is a very elusive goal for a child...and a very unfair burden to place on a parent...”

And yet this desire to make children happy, “to shield them from life’s ugliness,” has led to strange and bizarre excesses. For example, a few years ago Senior bought the original episodes of Sesame Street on dvd.

She did it out of nostalgia, it’s what she grew up watching.

And to her ASTONISHMENT, there was a warning at the beginning of the dvd:

The content in this dvd is not suitable for children.  
On dvds of Sesame Street??!!

When asked about this warning label, one of the show’s producers gave a variety of answers, such as there was a scene in which Cookie Monster is smoking a pipe, and then he swallows it, and this is poor modeling...

But the real stickler for Senior was when the Sesame Street producer said that she did not know whether Oscar the Grouch could be invented today, because he was too depressive.<sup>1</sup>

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I’ve been thinking about Senior’s book in recent days.

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<sup>1</sup> The references to work by Jennifer Senior comes from two sources: her book *All Joy and No Fun*, New York: HarperCollins, 2014, and at [https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer\\_senior\\_for\\_parents\\_happiness\\_is\\_a\\_very\\_high\\_bar](https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_senior_for_parents_happiness_is_a_very_high_bar).

As more and more people are vaccinated, as more and more of society goes back to activities that made us happy in the past, activities we stayed away from this past year, there seems to be a common goal: getting to a place where we can do the things we used to do that made us happy.

I've been thinking about that goal of happiness.

I think we all share it, to some degree.

The emotional toll of the pandemic has been ENORMOUS, and happiness most definitely has its place.

So please don't misunderstand what I'm about to say.

I'm not questioning the value of happiness in our lives.

I am questioning whether happiness the goal and purpose and point of Easter.

I'm asking what it means for God's church to live in the light of Easter, during a time when all of us are feeling a tug to return to the things that make us happy.

We are in the fourth Sunday of Easter, looking at how the apostles responded to the news of Easter, looking at how they lived in the light of Easter.

Right before our text from Acts for today, the apostles have been imprisoned by the authorities. After an angel releases them from prison, the angel tells the apostles:

“Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about [Jesus'] life.”

Which is what the apostles do.

They're spreading the good news of Easter.

And then Luke tells us that when the authorities “heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”

In other words, doing the job that God called them to do—  
spreading the joy of Easter—  
it didn’t lead straight to happiness.

It leads the apostles into danger.  
Easter came with a cost.

Something similar happens in our first passage this morning.  
Peter is talking with the risen Christ on the beach.  
It’s a beautiful scene.  
Peter forgiven by Jesus.  
Restored to friendship and fellowship with Jesus.  
Given a job to do by Jesus—feed my sheep.

And then John writes:

*Jesus said to him...when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and...go wherever you wished. But when you grow old...someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”*

That doesn’t quite sound like happiness to me.

Have you ever considered the good news of Easter—  
not only for the hope that it gives you,  
but what living in the light of Easter might cost you?

It’s a question most of us would rather not raise.

Easter is a season of joy, of celebration—new beginning, new life.  
Why would there be a cost to living in Easter’s light?

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The late pastor and author Ray Steadman frequently told the story of the old missionary couple who came home on the steamer at the end of a long career serving in Africa.

They were surprised when they got on the boat to discover that Teddy Roosevelt, the former president, was also on the ship.

They came to port in New York and they were a bit frustrated that such a fuss was being made about the former President's return from a recreational hunting trip.

The mayor came out. The band was there.

Everybody was engaging in a huge celebration at the return of Teddy Roosevelt from his safari.

But what about these two missionaries who had spent their lives trying to do things like build schools, churches and clinics?

They had gotten to the end of their career and they had no pension.

They were in poor health.

They were alone.

Discouraged and uncertain about their future, they quietly made their way off the boat and settled into the small apartment they had rented in New York City.

And the husband said to his wife, "But where is our celebration?"

And his wife smiled at him and said, "Ah, but we are not home yet."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As told by M. Craig Barnes, in his sermon "Yoked to the Kingdom," preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, March 28, 2007, found at [http://www.shadysidepres.org/sites/default/files/2007\\_03\\_28.pdf](http://www.shadysidepres.org/sites/default/files/2007_03_28.pdf).

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The poet Christian Wiman has written:

“One doesn’t follow God in hope of happiness  
but because one senses...a truth  
that renders ordinary contentment irrelevant.”<sup>3</sup>

THIS is the paradox of Easter.

Because the instinct most of us possess is to make our lives happy and content.

As columnist David Brooks recently wrote:

“I’m...convinced that the second half of this year is going to be more fantastic than we can imagine right now. We are going to become hyper-appreciators, savoring every small pleasure, living in a thousand delicious moments, getting together with friends and strangers and seeing them with the joy of new and grateful eyes.”<sup>4</sup>

That need for reconnection and joy is something every church needs to pay attention to.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the reality that not everyone will feel this way. That some of our neighbors are hurting because of the pandemic, and will be hurting after the pandemic, and that reality places a responsibility on God’s Church.

We are called to pay attention to a text like today’s:

“As they [the apostles] left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer...”

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Wiman, “I Will Love You in the Summertime,” in *The American Scholar*, February 29, 2016, found at <https://theamericanscholar.org/i-will-love-you-in-the-summertime/#>.

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, “How Covid Can Change Your Personality,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2021.

Worthy to suffer?  
That's what Easter means?

Or we hear a text like the one later in Acts, the conversion of Saul to become the Apostle Paul. When Saul is blinded, God goes to a disciple named Ananias, and tells Ananias to go lay hands on Saul.

Ananias replies: NO WAY!  
To which God replies:

“Go...I myself will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Do you see what we've got here?  
Easter, the good news of Easter—is going to cost us something.

Easter was not simply a way of giving Jesus eternal life.  
It was a vindication of the way he lived his life.

Easter was God's way of saying that Jesus' commitment to loving the unlovable, to touching the untouchable, to welcoming the shamed and the shunned and the shut out, to offering grace to rebellious younger brothers and self-righteous older brothers and tax collectors and Pharisees and everyone in between—Easter was God's way of saying, this is the life that I have called you to live, those of you who walk in Resurrection light...

And that life will lead to moments of happiness and profound joy along the way. But it will also come with cost, and here's the catch:

We don't get to know ahead of time what the cost is going to be. Have you ever had the experience of committing to something, some journey in life, and when you embarked on that journey, you did not truly know what it was going to cost you?

It sounds counter-intuitive.

Many of you have been to Disney before—the “happiest place on earth.” And before you went, I imagine you created a budget for yourself. You knew what you could afford, how long you could stay, what it was going to cost you.

It’s the way going to Disney works, but not the way the Christian life works.

Have you ever made a decision to do something, embark on some journey because you felt it was what you were supposed to do...and you did not know ahead of time what it would cost you...

But you committed anyway?  
You went on the journey anyway....

A few years ago, in the second season of the hit television series *This Is Us*, Randall and Beth become foster parents when they welcome a third daughter, Deja, into their home.

Deja’s mother is in prison, and Deja needs some stability in her life. And Randall and Beth have a beautiful home,  
with two beautiful daughters,  
and even though things get difficult when they add a teenager to their family, the family grows to love Deja, and she grows to love them too.

But then Deja’s mother is released from prison.  
The state deems her mother fit to care for her daughter,  
And the Pearson family has to let Deja go.



Now...they know—up here—this is what it means to be a foster parent. You take care of a child for a period of time, and then—many times—the child will leave your home.

But they love Deja and love the way their kids love her, and there's a part of them—*right here*—that does not WANT to Deja to go.

It's a roller coaster for the family, and later in the season, Deja's mother gives up her parental rights, and Deja comes to live with the Pearson family again. But Deja is full of anger—anger that her mother gave up parental rights, anger that her life is not like other kids' lives!

And at the end of the season, she takes a baseball bat and smashes Randall's car.

When Randall and Beth first agreed to be foster parents, did they understand where the journey would lead?

Of course not. Even with joy welcoming Deja into their home, they did not know, when they began the journey, what it would cost them to embark on that journey.

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What about your journey?

What about Westminster's journey?

As we come out of the pandemic, do we return to all our familiar ways of being God's church?

Could we also consider how the pandemic has changed us?

Could we also ask what new ways we can be God's church in the world because of what the pandemic has shown us about God's world?

There are two strong forces tugging on God's Church right now.

One is the return to what we're used to, the desire to reconnect and do that which brings us together as a community of faith.

For example, I am very much looking forward to enjoying DONUTS with all of you after worship in the not-too-distant future! This will undoubtedly make me happy, and I trust the same will be true for many of you!

That's one of the forces, and I'm looking forward to that with all of you!

But it's also true that there are people within our church and people outside our church who are hurting right now. Going through difficult times right now.

And the Church is called to love one another, both in here and out there, no matter the cost. All of which might just require us to embark on a new journey together.

Let me get at it like this.

The late preacher Dr. Fred Craddock once described a beautiful spring day when he was out in his yard, and he saw a sparrow walking down the street.

He said that this sparrow weighed about nine pounds.

A nine pound sparrow?

That's right. A nine pound sparrow.

So he went over to the bird.

“What are you doing walking?”

The sparrow replied, “Just getting some exercise, you know how it goes.”

“Well, why don’t you fly?”

“Fly? Are you crazy? I’ve never flown before. I could get hurt!”<sup>5</sup>

And as hard as he tried, Dr. Craddock just couldn’t talk that sparrow into doing what it was made by God to do.

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Imaginary story, imaginary sparrow.

But we are not an imaginary church.  
We are God’s church.

What is God’s church made by God to do?

If you’d like to imagine with me new ways that we can fly...

If you’d like to have a conversation about our church  
     taking a new journey,  
     to feed Christ’s sheep,  
     to spread the light and hope of Easter,  
     to embark on a way that will bring us great  
 joy and could also come with a cost...because that’s what the love of  
 God does with Easter, and that’s what God created God’s church to do...

I promise you that I will not be as stubborn as that sparrow.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001.