

LOOKING FOR PONIES, JESUS AND JOY

This past Thursday the professional football season got underway. My wife Linda was delighted that her Steelers won their opener. I'm not a big football fan, but frankly it's a bit of relief that the season has started, for that means baseball season is almost over.

Sometimes it's very hard being a Red Sox fan. You sail through April and May, soar to the top of the standings in June and July, and then along comes August and it all falls apart. 9and 21 this year, oh my! Winning the World Series two years ago, making the playoffs last season spoiled us. We forgot that it's not all that unusual for our beloved Bosox to fold like a broken lawn chair in the dog days of summer. But now it's happened again—just like most other years. That's why you've got to be an optimist to follow the team from Beantown. That's why you've got to be able to say "Well, there's always next year!"—and really mean it!

Lowell Streiker tells about a time he and his Dad once stopped to watch some kids play a pick-up game of baseball. Streiker's father asked one of the outfielders "What's the score?"

"We're behind, 27-0."

"Holy smokes!" said Streiker's Dad, "I bet that's pretty discouraging."

"Nah," said the kid, "We haven't even been up to bat yet." (203)

Now that's an optimist!

You do know the difference between an optimist and a pessimist, don't you?

A pessimist is somebody who goes into a barn, looks around at the hay, the straw and the manure, and says, "Oh my word—what a mess! This'll take me forever to clean up!"

An optimist, though, goes into the same barn, and says, "Wow! There must be a pony in here!"

You see, it's all a matter of perspective. It's a matter of choice. You can focus on the negative, on the bad, or you can choose to look for the good.

An anonymous writer recovering from addiction writes in a daily meditation book for addicts: "I look for the good . . . Sometimes it requires quite a stretch, but the

stretch is worth it. Focusing on the bad brings pain; the joy comes in finding the good. I'd rather have joy!" (*Voices of Recovery*, 249)

Theologian Henri Nouwen is very blunt about it: "Joy," he writes, "does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." (*Here and Now*, 27)

We have to choose joy, and keep choosing it everyday.

But preacher, you may be saying, you just don't understand. My life is riddled with problems. Nothing seems to be going right. I've got financial difficulties, family conflicts and major health concerns. I'm worried about my job, the war in Iraq, hurricane season and the ongoing threat of terrorism. How can you talk about choosing joy?

Nouwen replies: "[But] we do have a choice, not so much in regards to the circumstances of our life, but in the way we respond to those circumstances." (Ibid)

You see, joy and happiness are not the same thing. Happiness depends on external things: how much money you have; how many friends you've made; where you live; what you do in school or on the job. But joy, as Nouwen says, "comes from the knowledge of God's love for us." (Ibid, 26) When we choose joy we choose to live rooted in that love, rather than in the shifting sands of life's circumstances. When we choose joy, when we choose to believe God loves us now and throughout all eternity, then we can have the security and calm we need to see through the threats and dangers that come our way. We can focus on finding the good rather and looking for the bad. It's not about being a Pollyanna. It's about being rooted in the unconditional and never-ending love of the Creator.

You may have been a bit surprised to hear the nativity story read on the second Sunday in September. I mean, it's bad enough that stores started selling Halloween candy in August, but at least *they* haven't put out the Christmas decorations yet!

But I chose our passage because it's the perfect example of what it means to live life rooted in God's love. It is the perfect example of choosing joy!

We sometimes forget, this is not a pretty story—in fact it is full of difficulties, dangers and threats. It is, after all, set in a country occupied by foreign troops. It's about an unwed mother and a dangerous journey and unfair taxation.

At every turn in the story, though, someone has a choice—look for the good, or see only the bad. Choose sorrow and confusion, or choose joy.

Mary finds out she's going to give birth out of wedlock, but she's told the child is destined to be the Messiah. She can choose shame and disbelief, or she can choose to trust in God's love.

And she does. She chooses joy.

Joseph is told his fiancée is pregnant, and he's not the father, but he's also told the child will be the savior of Israel. He can choose anger and rejection, or he can choose to trust in God's love.

And he does. He chooses joy.

The shepherds are told that a baby born in a barn is to be the promised heir to King David. They can choose to see nothing but a mewling infant and his poor parents, who don't even rate a room, or they can trust God's love.

And they do. They choose joy.

Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds are all caught up in the midst of an unlikely story, and each one of them must make a choice, several choices. Will they see only the bad, or will they look for the good and choose joy.

And they all choose joy!

And that, sisters and brothers, is the same choice you and I face each and every day. As story after story of disasters and devastations fill our newspapers, fill our computer and television screens, we are faced with the same options. As we encounter difficulties and problems in our own lives, we are confronted with that very choice.

These past two weeks we've been bombarded with news reports reminding us of two recent disasters: 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. As we mark the anniversaries of these devastating events you may feel hard pressed to see the good in either of them. But its there if you will only look. Indeed, the stories of some of those caught up in these tragedies can provide us with examples to follow as we seek to discover the good.

Immediately after 9/11 Chuck Boyer, a Church of the brethren pastor in LaVerne, California, was invited to attend an interfaith meeting. There he learned that Muslim City of Knowledge, a school, not five miles from his church, had closed. The Islamic parents, teachers and students had been threatened and were afraid that they might become the targets of revenge. And well they might. After 9/11 anti-Islamic sentiments were often expressed. I personally remember talking with one Muslim friend in New Jersey who told me how his young daughter had been called vicious names by classmates, and threatened with violence.

At the interfaith meeting Boyer and other Christian pastors were asked if they would organize parishioners to stand in front of the Muslim school in a show of solidarity, so that the teachers and students might return to their studies.

Boyer and the others faced a choice—succumb to the hatred and vengeful words swirling all around them, or look for the good in these innocent Muslim-American children. But they were secure in their faith, because they trusted in God’s love. And so, despite the great fear and sorrow of those post 9/11 days, they could see the good, they could choose joy.

And, on September 19, Boyer and others, showed up at the school to lend their support. And they stayed at their posts for several weeks, keeping watch as children carrying lunch bags and books made their way into their classrooms.

A relationship of trust and understanding began to grow between the Muslims and members of Boyer’s congregation. They exchanged visits for worship. They planned for future joint endeavors.

Perhaps it was all best captured in a thank you note written by a fifth-grader to Boyer’s congregation.

“Dear People,” it read, “You make me feel safe. Without you I wouldn’t feel safe. I like how polite you are. With you I won’t feel suspicious. This is a thanks from my best friends and me. Love, Hassan.” (Shirley Boyer, “Standing in Solidarity”, in *Chicken Soup for the Soul of America*, 306)

It may not bring an end to terrorism, or solve all the problems in the Middle East, but it is a start, and today things are a bit better in LaVerne, all because a pastor and his parishioners were rooted in God’s love. And able to choose joy.

As we’ve just observed the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina we’ve heard a great deal about how slowly recovery operations are going in New Orleans. Most homes that were damaged still lie in ruins. Bodies are still being discovered. The infrastructure is in shambles and a majority of hospitals are still closed. Many schools still haven’t opened and churches remained scattered.

Many people there have had a great deal of difficulty seeing any good in it all—and who can blame them? It is a horrid situation. Complaints run high

But some have chosen to look for the good—including one Vietnamese priest named Vien Nguyen.

Katrina was far from the first time Father Nguyen faced tribulation. In 1975 when Saigon fell, he was one of the Vietnamese boat people who made their way to freedom in the United States. Drug dealers could be seen on street corners and violence was not uncommon.

His parish, Mary Queen of Vietnam, is very impoverished. It is in the Versailles neighborhood in eastern New Orleans. It butts up against the dirt levees that lined the back end of New Orleans hurricane control system. The area is worn down and

dangerous. Even before Katrina many of the streets were strewn with trash and stacks of old tires.

When warnings about Katrina were first issued, Father Nguyen opened the Parish School as a shelter. But as the flood waters rose, they were forced to leave. But Father Nguyen vowed to return, and a few weeks later he did. He and several parishioners brought in chainsaws and generators and food and started to clean up. Though the city government had warned that no one was to stay in the area overnight, Father Nguyen and forty men from his church defied the order and continued their work that no one else seemed ready to undertake.

On a Sunday in early October, Father Nguyen said mass for three hundred. The next week eight hundred attended—and then two thousand, including the archbishop.

Father Nguyen was relentless in his lobbying efforts. He managed to convince the Army Corps of Engineers to send in a crew to clean up debris. He challenged the electric company when they declared that the Versailles neighborhood wouldn't get power for four months. If you can promise us one hundred paying customers, they said, we'll hook up power. Father Nguyen guaranteed five hundred. And by the time Christmas rolled around the whole neighborhood was twinkling with lights, a good two months ahead of schedule. (Source: Christopher Cooper, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security*, 250-255)

All this happened because of a Vietnamese priest so grounded in God's love that he could see the good, the possibilities, in the midst of devastation. He could dream and work and push for his people. He could choose joy.

Sisters and brothers, you and I are called to do the same. You and I are called to be like that excited kid, eager for his turn at bat. We are called to see beyond the manure. You and I are called to be like Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds. You and I are called to be like Pastor Boyer and Father Nguyen. We are called to be so rooted in God's love that we too can look and work for the good, no matter what the circumstances.

We are called to look for Jesus and joy. And we are called to make a choice.

And while I can't speak for any one else, personally, I'm with that anonymous addict: I'd rather have joy. I'd rather have joy.

**Amen
John H. Danner**

