

In their Book of Joy, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu cite a study from the University of Glasgow in 2014 that found that our emotional lives are governed by only four basic emotions; fear, anger, sadness, and joy. And the study concluded that all of the other emotions that we feel are permutations of the four basic ones. The study, which is based on our facial expressions in each of the basic emotions, found that our expression for surprise was exactly like that of fear, and our expression for disgust was the same as when we feel anger. What is significant about this study is that out of our four basic emotions, with which we are gifted only one is positive; and for the next 350 pages of their book the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu seek to teach their readers how to cultivate, experience, and maintain joy. That is not to say that they have not and will not experience pain, sadness, anger or fear, but that they will cultivate joy within themselves. Their deep belief is that we alone are the agents of change in our lives and that cultivating joy is the ultimate life goal. They introduce their book with these words:

“No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day and each moment, we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on our planet. This is the power we wield. ....”Lasting happiness....resides only in the human mind and heart, and it is here that we hope you will find it.” If the goal of life is to find lasting happiness, I know for myself I have a lot of work to do. I would love to live in a constant state of peace and joy, but life keeps getting in my way.

Some of you may remember a TV series in the 90s called Touched By an Angel. This faith based series was about three angels sent to earth to tell depressed and troubled people that God loves them and hasn't forgotten them. The people that the angels meet have a wide assortment of physical

and psychological ills rampant in our world today, and each episode is paired in title and theme with a biblical reference. The series ran for 211 episodes over the course of nine years, and I remember being both intrigued and a little bemused by the fact that every episode concluded with a dramatic transformation of the person in trouble.

In our Gospel today, we have a man who experiences a profound transformation when Jesus restores his vision after a lifetime of being blind. This man is profoundly changed not only through his ability to see, but in other ways as well. In fact, the story reveals that the man is unrecognizable to people who have known him all of his life. He has experienced a newness that makes him a transformed person to himself, his neighbors and even his parents. Imagine becoming a new being within a period of minutes as in our Gospel story, or even over a period of 30 minutes like an episode of Touched By an Angel. A positive and wonderful transformation has taken place, but the disruption and commotion has had a profound effect on this man's life. - ----- And that is true whenever we experience a transformation in our own lives. ----- Think about the important changes in your own life, even the ones that happened over an extended period of time. As you became a different person, those around you needed to change their definitions of who you were and who you were becoming.

People who have recovered from drug addiction and alcoholism often have stories which reflect the disruptions in their relationships with their friends and family who, for years, had defined them by their addiction. When their addiction ceased, their friends and family struggled to adjust to the new person in their midst. In fact, many addicts have found that they need to start a whole new life with a new set of friends and maybe even reject members of their family who could see them in a new light. They are transforming into new people, but their family, friends and community are unchanged.

----- Systems do not like change. Anyone who has ever taken a sociology or psychology class in college knows the variety of ways that a systems seeks to maintain the status quo. In our Gospel today, we see the blind man's family distancing themselves from him to protect them from being thrown out of the synagogue. And perhaps the fear of being rejected or shunned is the reason that the community at large must refute or deny the change in the man that is so clear and obvious.

Eventually the man who now 'sees' is kicked out of the community, because it is much easier for his community to continue to function if they do not have to be reminded of the possibility of positive change. It is also too great a risk to the Pharisees to acknowledge that this man was cured by Jesus and that Jesus was sent by God; for doing so would undermine their authority.

At the end of the story, the Pharisees, having failed to beat Jesus theologically or on the grounds of common sense resort to violence and physical force and throw the man out of the synagogue rather than change their views about Jesus.

As I read the Gospel, I was taken aback by how much like the Pharisees I can become when faced with a situation that is alien to my basic belief system. I can find myself reacting with the same basic fear that the Pharisees show in our story today. Whenever I don't want to hear what others are saying, all I have to do is retreat to the belief in my individual "rightness"; my individual view that God is on my side. And when I do this, I become the counterpoint to the work of Jesus, because Jesus does not reject the Pharisees point of view as much as he chastises them for being unable to see another point of view. Their sin is being blind to the truth which is so easy to see, but they refuse to see it. As Bill Ellis so eloquently put it in a sermon on this topic "...when we move into that place where we begin to

believe that our maps and categories are the only possible maps and categories, and that nothing outside them could ever be truly holy, truly of God, we become spiritually blind and deaf.”

In our Gospel today, Jesus is seeking to free us from our blindness, our fear of change, our fear of the other in our midst and give us a glimpse of what it means to be open to a new way of being. This is certainly easier said than done. Transformation is frightening, disruptive and in most cases painfully slow. But what we have to gain is joy and peace.

It is only through seeing myself in the character of the Pharisee that I can understand how much there is to learn about my own barriers to achieving that inner peace and happiness. For each of us our individual perception of God is not God. Our understandings and perceptions are not universal truths to be shouted from the rooftop. Or as Joan Chittister says, “The world is not simply us. It is a profusion of differences in concert. ...We are simply part of the cast of extras called humanity.” If the source of my comfort, peace and joy is rooted in a foundation that I have all the answers to life, I am in a sense rejecting God and the possibilities that God might offer me. It is only in welcoming a new idea, perspective or point of view into my thinking; it is only in seeing another possibility as an opportunity to grow, that I can move toward true inner joy and happiness.

The blind man in our story today was a person who walked in darkness. Fear, sadness, and anger are all part of our darkness even as they are all part of our lives. Jesus gives the man sight and opens up the world to him. And we, today, are offered the same opportunity. Jesus not only says, “I am the light of the world”, but he also says “you are the light of the world”. But your light and my light are surrounded by millions of other lights. Together we can illuminate the darkness. For it is only in allowing

those other lights to shine within our own hearts that we can bask in the true light of God.