

A Theology of Joy—Feeling toward God’s Goodness and Love

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4

As we have seen, human life seeks more than survival alone. It seeks to flourish and find itself affirmed within a larger framework of value and purpose. Life seeks delight in living; it seeks joy.

THOMAS REYNOLDS¹

How can I play in a strange land, in an alienated and alienating society?
How can we laugh and rejoice when there are still so many tears to be
wiped away and when new tears are being added every day?

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN²

I have been arguing for the value of experiencing deep joy and wellbeing, especially as part and parcel of the practice of pastoral care. The value of joy may seem obvious to some, as it was to Saint Paul, who vigorously exhorted the Philippian church to rejoice. Thomas Reynolds notes that human life fairly cries out for more than mere existence; it yearns for value, purpose, delight, and joy. Yet for others, and oddly enough for many pastoral theologians, the value of joy—the reason to rejoice—is less self-evident. Some consider it selfish to attend to their own wellbeing, indulgent to experience outright delight. For others, pervasive experiences of suffering and evil seem to block out the possibility of feeling joy. Then there is the pastoral question of insensitivity to the suffering of others that Jürgen Moltmann articulates in the epigraph above. How can we play, laugh, and rejoice in this strange world in which we live, a world in which so many are suffering, and in which “new tears are being added every day”?

In this chapter I suggest a way of moving forward with these theological questions. The way forward that I am commending involves feeling our way toward God’s own goodness, love, and joy. Attention to inner knowing is crit-

1 Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 118.

2 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (London: SCM, 1973), 27.

ical to the process of regaining what Peggy Way calls a “firm grounding in the faith claim as to the goodness of God.”³ To explore and embrace a theology of joy, one does not have to repudiate important work on the ambiguity of God, nor deny the existence of evil and sin.⁴ Rather, we need to “make room for joy”⁵ in an age when pastoral theologies often seem to get stuck in the proclamation of radical suffering, violence, and evil.⁶ Granting that it is important, indeed crucial, for caregivers to be willing to go all the way down into experiences of sorrow and the outrage of injustice in order to understand and bear witness to truth, I argue that it becomes all the more important to discover pathways back up toward experiences of grace, hope, and joy. In order to offer care that opens paths toward fullness of life, it is crucial that caregivers develop the capacity to feel and perceive the full theological weight (or lightness?) of the goodness, beauty, and wonder of God, and of life itself.

Theologies of Joy

Theology has been defined as the study of God and all things in relation to God. The theologies expressed in the three narratives introduced in the previous three chapters tend toward first-order or “primary theology.”⁷ They are informal and non-technical theologies, springing from reflection upon the experience of God in the context of particular, situated stories of caregiving ministries. This latter element also makes them pastoral theologies, in that they grow out of lived experiences of caring relationships brought into conversation with scripture, theology, and social, psychological, and spiritual reflection. They are also theologies of joy in that they express, through both action and reflection, faith in the goodness, beauty, and love of God.

Thus far we have concentrated on the *lived* aspects of these “theologies-in-action.”⁸ These authors—Heidi Neumark, Henri Nouwen, and Gregory

3 Peggy Way, *Created by God: Pastoral Care for All God’s People* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 138.

4 See, for example, James Newton Poling, *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), esp. pp. 90–91.

5 Way, *Created by God*, 136–137.

6 For a good description of the importance of naming radical suffering, see Susan L. Nelson, “Facing Evil: Evil’s Many Faces: Five Paradigms for Understanding Evil,” *Interpretation* 57, no. 4 (2003): 399–413. Also see John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

7 David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 19.

8 See Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 170–199.