

Sing for Joy! **The Power of Sacred Narrative among Urban Youth**

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Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing

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Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.

Acts 8:4-8

In the guiding framework Miroslav Volf, the director of the Theology of Joy and the Good Life Project the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, describes joy as the “crown of the good life.”¹ Following from this definition, we ask: how is the “crown of the good life” manifest in the city and how is it indispensable for adolescent faith and flourishing? How is joy an expression of life for young people? Where do we find joy overflowing in the city? How can young people situate themselves in a narrative of joy?

We begin with three observations. The first is that the experience of joy is part of community, and communities are held together by stories; from these stories, in community, flows the “crown of the good life”.² There are many different possible moments, practices and ways in the life of the church where the sacred story is shared - singing, community, healing, signs of life through God’s power, preaching, Eucharist, presence, and laughter - all of the Gospel. The second is that joy is found in the city—in Pentecostal and other churches that are thriving in every neighborhood of the city. The third observation is that one of the gifts of a church is helping young people situate themselves within a sacred narrative of Christian theological commitment and understanding; from that foundation, youth connect to a deeper reservoir of joy.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Theology of Joy and the Good Life Project*. Throughout this chapter we draw on the insights of the Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing advisory board led by Skip Masback and Sarah Farmer. We are grateful for the opportunity this project has given us.

² Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

In the Acts of the Apostle, as people move around the world through migration, sharing their belief in Jesus as they go, and bring healing to bodies and spirits, there is “great joy in that city.” We believe something similar is taking place today, a story introduced in *Stay in the City: How Christian Faith is Flourishing in an Urban World*.³ As movements of Christian faith from Africa, Asia and Latin America move across cities and continents, as faith is shared in ordinary life of work, school and urban life, as healing takes place, there is “great joy in the city.”

We now turn to a closer look from our experience, taking us into the ways that joy in the city is expressed through living a sacred narrative.

Notes of Joy

Almost 15 year ago, a good friend invited me (Yvette) to attend a service of the Damascus Christian Church of Hunts Point, a Pentecostal church in the South Bronx. I came with my two girls at one of the lowest points of my life. At the time, I worked for a large Community Health Center, which was the only source of financial support I had.

³ Eerdmans, 2017.

Even at this point many years later, I still find it difficult to describe my encounter with Jesus that night. It was as if He filled a void in me with love, a sense of peace, joy and hope.

Shortly after attending the service, I was asked to provide a personal email address and as hard it may seem to believe, I did not have one. So, I went home and began to search for a name. I know I wanted something that would give a little description of how I felt about Jesus. I went to my Bible and learned that God's Word speaks of joy and living joyfully everywhere I turned. That's it, I thought, my email would use the word "joyfully." But there was also a "new song" that God has placed in me. So my address combined joy and singing! When people ask me about my email address, often the first thought that comes to them is, "you are a singer." My response is no, it something that describes the joy the Lord gives me each day. This opens a door for me to share God's joy and what it means to me.

Today, I want to share with you what joy means to me and how that is lived out at the Damascus Christian Church of Hunts Point. I am presently the treasurer, children's director and Sunday school teacher. I work together with others to support our children, pre-teens and youth in our church.

We have services three days a week. There is a mid-week prayer service, a Friday Service that alternates weekly for men, women, children and youth, and our Sunday School. We are bilingual worshipping community. And to welcome all generations we blend singing traditional hymns along with contemporary songs, Spanish and English.

At Damascus, adults, children, pre-teens and teens come together as one. Yes, we believe in youth services and events geared to the youth. But we also model and create a space of joy for our youth. Through sharing our testimonies, praise dance, worshipping the Lord in song, eating and fellowshiping together, and loving one another unconditionally, we work to create a welcoming community for young people. Coming together as one builds relationships and a beautiful community, that youth feel a part of.

The roles and experiences of young people at Damascus are many. They are part of the worship team, share in distributing communion, and helping with the children. They may take part in leading a song, reading a poem or a praise dance. Or they may play the piano or run the sound system. We pray together on Friday nights, and join together in church wide game nights.

Are there challenges and difficulties? Yes, of course. As a parent and church leader, I would be the first to say to you that it is not a bowl of cherries nor a walk through the tulips each week. We must remember each day that we are living in difficult times, so imagine what our youth face each day.

Even through the challenges, we find such great joy to see how God brings healing, physically and emotionally to their lives. We see and celebrate how families are reconciled, how homes are restored. This is why it is important for us to realize that every space we are in is sacred, every moment open to joy. God is alive! Christ changes our lives! The Spirit heals! Indeed, there is joy!

Singing the Story

At Damascus church, there is the joy of God! It is the presence of God in the body, in life, in singing and dancing.⁴ Joy is present in families and communities that come together around worship, centered in a sacred narrative.

⁴ For these elements, see Jurgen Moltmann, "Christianity: A Religion of Joy," Yale Center for Faith and Culture, September 7-8, 2012.

Joy can convey what is most deeply held by a group, its sense of community, purpose, of *communitas*.⁵ This sense of purpose and community is something of what we encounter in my (Miriam's) story about Damascus, and it enables us to focus in why it is important for adolescents and their families to locate their lives in a community that lives out a joyful sacred narrative.

First, in the Damascus community, young people are formed in ways of understanding that this sacred narrative and family in faith is *my* story. Young people are not treated as future leaders, but as present leaders. They preach, dance, lead singing, and give testimony. Even as young people move away, they never lose the sense that *I am* this story and community.

Second, in the Damascus community, young people are formed in habits and practices of understanding that this as a family story. Young people most often come as part of families, and also become part of a larger family. Both paths are inter-generational. As we have commented, joyful worship, singing and dancing are ways of delighting in God. This life of worship and community takes place as a family. It is here where each

⁵ See Turner

of us learns the importance of contributing to the flourishing of the community, in the city.

Third, joy and the narrative that speaks of joy are vital because of the challenges young people face in the city. There is, for example, pressure in school and relationships, and the precariousness of life in these times. At Damascus, there is a witness to how God's intentions for human life "break through." There is the healing and faithfulness of God, and the whole community gives testimony. Together, this brings the joy of gratitude and dependence upon God.

Fourth, as the account of Damascus illustrates, the story that animates the Damascus community and connects everything together is found in the person, life, saving work, and saving power of Jesus. Through the Spirit, God is a faithful God who saves, heals and delivers. There is also longing for change. This story is told from Scripture and is robustly theological, embodied in joyful worship.

In all four of these ways, joy describes the experience of Damascus, young people and families together.

God Belongs in My City

We have spoken of Damascus as an example of joy in the city. God Belongs in My City is another place we find joy in the city. Founded in Brooklyn by a youth leader and his youth group, God Belongs in My City is a church-based movement of youth leaders and young people from Latino and African American congregations. Each year they gather together and walk across Manhattan, meeting in Times Square, praying and singing as they go. They petition God for the well-being of the city, for the schools, families, police, and public leaders. Their joy is in God, the God who has saved them and loves the city. As the sacred story meets the city, singing and praying is how they convey this narrative to the city. And they keep walking, praying and singing.

Curriculum Suggestions

How could the importance of sacred narrative be incorporated into curriculum that supports adolescent faith and flourishing?

First, the sacred narrative that expresses joy is the joy of God celebrated in worship. There are many types of worship, but each is relational, to God, one another and neighbor. Joyful worship brings people into a new center, a new life, a new story.

Second, find many ways to tell the sacred story of Jesus. We can be creative and include the arts and communal ways of learning.

Third, listen to young people, their fears and longings, their hopes and joys. Make the sure the conversation is open, be honest about the sacred story of this God's world, where Christ has risen to new life.

Summary

In this essay, we have introduced the subject of joy in relationship to the sacred story. This has taken us to focus on communities: congregations as sites of festive joy, of life in God. While we cannot create joy for adolescents, as the people of God we can invite one another into the joy of the living God in the city. For indeed "there is great joy in the city."

In conclusion, keep singing and sharing the story!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

Where do you experience joy in your city?

How does your Christian community identify habits and practices for young people to share in leading the congregation and worship?

Can you think of new ways that the sacred narrative of Christian faith can be expressed in your congregation?

What are the ways young people talk about joy, their longings and hopes?

Abstract

Building on the framework of Miroslav Volf that joy is the crown of the good life, in this chapter we suggest joy for adolescents can be found in communities and the stories that they tell. Building on the example of Damascus Christian Church of Hunts Point in the South Bronx, we show how the core narrative of the Christian story is embodied in singing, dancing, healing, preaching and testifying. Joy in the living God who gives new life becomes the center of a life together in the city.

Authors

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