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Joy in my heart audio.mp3

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation. I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart, down, in my heart. I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart to stay. I loved that song when I was a kid, and I'm going to be honest, it has been playing like a loop in my head ever since I learned that this joy was going to be the theme for this season. I was excited to get to explore joy with you here at Wellsprings because it was actually thinking about joy that led me directly to you. A little less than three years ago, I was beginning to explore changing my life completely. And I sat down with the senior minister at my home congregation and attempted to articulate my sense of calling to you your ministry. And in doing that, I also articulated all of my fears. And she said to me something like, You know, Beth, when you talk, I can hear your excitement about this work, and I hear that, you know, it will be a hard path. But isn't staying where you are. We you're not feeling joy also a hard path. And then she asked me this question. Don't you think you deserve joy? And I was stunned. And that question stayed with me for days and weeks, months, years. Obviously, I'm still thinking about it, but I slowly began to realize in the days after that meeting with her that apparently, no, I don't think I deserve joy.

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Or at least I had been living as if I didn't. I realized that I had grown a little bit afraid of joy of its promises and possibilities that I was living as if I was afraid joy would be snatched away from me, guarding myself against it, that I was actually fearful that I did not deserve joy. And so I had been flinching away from it. The realization of that flinching made me see that I had been coasting along on contentment, on being fine, on an overall sense of weariness and and that really surprised me because overall I think of myself as a fairly happy person and I apparently have been since I was an infant. My family tells me that since I was a baby, all it took was simple little things to make me happy. And so as I thought about what it meant that I had grown to think I didn't deserve joy, I also thought about all the times I had found joy in my childhood. Now, on paper, some people say that objectively my childhood was hard. But for me, for me, I just have tons of happy memories of running around with my siblings and cousins in the woods, climbing trees. I loved trees and I was an avid climber and I challenged myself to go ever higher. And I remember when I was probably seven or eight.

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Reaching peaks one summer, and every time I got to a higher part, I would just burst into joyful song and actually sing as I scrambled back down. I remember taking these long, rambling walks with my grandmother, my mama, who was the most important person in my life. And we would hold tight to each other's hands and walk in silence or talk to each other. And the deep sense of joy I felt in her presence is something that stays with me still. I remember how much I loved books and how much joy they brought me when relatives would go thrifting and bring back bags or boxes. I always got first dibs on books and I had so much joy when the bookmobile would come to my rural school. And I remember clear as day like, it was a holy experience the first time I walked into the Central Library. In Milwaukee and that large giant edifice that walking in felt like a cathedral, I literally stopped and looked up in awe at the thought of all those books. Point of these stories is that I was not a stranger to joy. But I had lost sight of it in that question. Do you think you deserve joy? Help me to start to notice again. And in noticing, I started to see joy everywhere, you know, like when you buy a new car and then everywhere you go, everyone has the same car as I was thinking about joy and what it meant.

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Within months of my minister asking me that question, I actually found an article in the New York Times by David Brooks, who was asking the same questions. I was. What is happiness and joy? Brooks said this about the distinctions between the two. Happiness usually involves a victory for the self. Joy tends to involve transcendence of self. Happiness comes from accomplishments. Joy comes when your heart is in another. I thought about that, and as I was pondering that, I also stumbled across the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, which has an ongoing project that was begun in 2014 on Get This The Theology of Joy and the Good Life. The Yale Project describes joy as fundamental to human existence and well-being, and they have interviews with theologians and practitioners of various faiths, and they ask them to reflect on joy. And while their answers vary, there's a running theme where they describe that joy is a state of happiness transmuted by the presence of God. Or the divine or the universe or whatever name we might give to that which is beyond ourselves. It's funny because our own Kathleen Higgins right from the spot two weeks ago talked about that very thing that those theologians named. That joy is fundamental. She said joy is our birthright, our birthright as humans. And while happiness. Happiness could be determined by our base personalities or by our circumstances.

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And like all emotions, happiness is changeable and sometimes externally triggered. And that's OK. But joy, joy. People seem to be saying, is more consistent. It runs deeper. And importantly, joy can be experienced even when we don't feel happy. In the months when I started thinking about joy, I began to define it this way, that joy is like happiness that has outgrown its borders. Joy takes us deeply into and beyond ourselves, and it necessarily involves connection. Connection to nature, to other people, to communities, to beauty. To the divine. Joy asks for our attention. Asks us to notice, to slow down, to be mindful and fully present. Kathleen talked about that as well, about mindfulness as a practice to enter into joy. And just last week in the wild and precious lives, when the speakers talked, that's the theme I heard over and over from them that their lives were wild and precious when they were present fully in each moment. And when I think about those childhood memories, I shared climbing trees, holding my grandma's hands, enjoying books, what each of those moments have is that I was fully present in them. And as I thought about it, I realized I hadn't just had joy in my childhood. I had experienced joy in moments since then. My wedding day. Here's a photo of me and my husband when we were babies on that very day. But I sprinted down the aisle, literally nearly ran, and I was so overcome by joy that I laughed through the entire ceremony.

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Thirteen years ago, my nephew, Mannix was born and my sister asked me to be a labor and delivery coach for her. And while I am not going to lie to you, I am now convinced that childbirth is the inspiration for all sci fi ever made. I also know that I was overcome with joy and an abiding sense of connection. The moment I saw that baby's face. Those moments, large moments like weddings and births have joy in them, but small, ordinary moments due to. And I thought about all of those big and small, ordinary moments of joy as I ask, do I think I deserve joy? And then I came to realize in remembering and noticing that the truth is joy has been an underground spring flowing into me all of my life, even when I didn't notice, even when I thought I didn't deserve it. Joy was there. And that if you'll allow me wellspring of joy, it's present for all of us. In times both momentous and mundane. We just don't always notice, do we? We don't always pay attention because we're too busy or we have too much on our minds were too weighed down by our daily responsibilities. We live as I was living a few years ago, as if we don't have time for joy, as if it's some sort of luxury we don't deserve.

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But Joy is there for us. And when I decided that I wanted the answer to that question to be, yes, I deserve joy. Then I devoted time to remembering joy, to noticing it and to being present in moments every day. And we can all take that time. We can take the time in these seasons of change, we can notice tightly furled buds of spring and tender shoots of daffodils breaking through the Earth and feel the joy inherent in their blooming. We can notice and see and smell and taste the ripe fruits of summer and savor each bite while we honor the joy of the sun and the rain, and yes, the labor that brings such bounty to our plates. We can take time to notice the tender veins of an oak leaf as it turns bright yellow and drifts on autumn breezes. And we can honor the joy of the transformation of life. We can notice even the beauty of swirling snowflakes in winter and put aside for a moment the thoughts of shoveling and just marvel at the miracle of each unique flake. We can listen to the laughter of our children. We can slow down and make our meals last twice as long. We can do what we love, whether it's collecting rocks or gardening or parenting. We can make space for all of our emotions. We can commit to spiritual practices that help us be here now.

[00:13:12] Speaker1

This is how we cultivate joy. This is how we live as if we deserve it. By being present in the world, by remembering, as poet Mary Oliver wrote in her poem Wild Geese, that the world offers itself to your imagination, it calls to you, announces your place in the family of things. And if Joy is that Wellspring that transcends self and is cultivated through connection, then our place in the family of things is a beautiful way to describe how joy feeds that wellspring of our interconnected web of life. I love that seventh principle of Unitarian universalism that names are interconnectedness. That speaks to my values and my theology. It speaks to how I understand the world, but it also speaks to a frustration I have because I know the world we have inherited that we humans have created too often cuts and denies those interconnections. And because of that, I cannot wax poetic about joy and unintentionally imply that it magically sets a right all the world's wrongs or to say the harm we humans do doesn't matter in the face of joy. No, that isn't what I mean. Because the world is hurting. I don't need to tell you that. I don't need to tell you that our political times are perilous and fraught. I don't need to tell you that too many people here in this community are suffering under the vise grip of poverty and injustice. I don't need to tell you all the ways that white supremacy culture dehumanizes us all or the ways in which consumer capitalism devalues and destroys lives on a daily basis.

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And I don't need to tell you, I'm guessing how this pandemic is a glaring example of all of that, how it has wrecked devastation and continues to raucous in grief and uncertainty. You know, these things, you feel these things, you know, the crushing weight of grief that is public and systemic and personal and private. And we are all of us carrying so many losses, and in the face of that. Speaking of joy, can feel almost pointless. Almost. My mama, my grandma. She died in the fall of 2013. And her loss is a gaping hole in my heart. I know that even 40 years from now, I'm going to wake up and think I need to tell her that. And then the sharp pangs of grief are going to hit me a fresh. But I know also that when I feel that pain, I can also still feel her hand in mine, and the joy of that is in no way lessened by her passing. And in fact, the joy I take in remembering her. Lightens my grief. We've all suffered personal losses. And I hope. Does I find joy in the memory of my grandmother's hands that you too can find joy that sustains you through your hardest moments? I've seen an example of that here at Wellsprings.

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Many of you many of you have shared memories of Robert Merritt, and Kathleen spoke eloquently of him and her service. And I never met Robert, but your sharing of him, of his light and his joy makes me feel as if I have. I am blessed by the sustaining joy that companions you, as Kathleen said, in your sorrow. By the joy that you lift up, that sees you through memories and darkness. This joy, this life nurturing joy is the joy we all deserves, no matter, or perhaps because of the conditions of the world. Ivan Cabrera, who is Bear with me here, an eco feminist theologian from Brazil, and I love her work. I've been reading it for a few years, but in one of her books called Out of the Depths. Which is actually a study on evil in the modern world. In that book, Yvonne Gabbar relates the story of a Brasile Afro-Brazilian woman named Carolina Maria de Jesus, who lived in the slums of Sao Paulo and collected trash on the streets just to be able to sustain her and her children. But Carolina Maria de Jesus also kept a journal every day, she wrote in it, and that journal eventually was published in Brazil and elsewhere. And it is a witness to her indomitable spirit and her longing to connect with life sustaining joy. Gabbar quotes a passage in which Maria de Jesus writes, I got out of bed at four a.m.

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to write. I opened the door and gazed at the starry sky. Reading that passage, I was remediated. I was immediately reminded of an Oscar Wilde quote. We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars. If anyone could be said to be literally in the gutter, it would be a woman like de Jesus, a black woman who was a second class citizen in her own country who barely survived on the scraps others threw down. And yet she made time not only to notice Joy, but to record it, and joy was not about her material conditions, nor importantly was it about some illusory afterlife, rather for DeJesus. Joy was about the precious moments she lived despite the slums around her, and she took time to record the conditions of those slums. But she took time to record the moments of joy, too, because while the stars will not make the conditions of the gutter go away, the gutter does not make the stars shine any less bright. And so it matters, it matters that we speak of joy, it matters that we claim it because it's Sojourner, Truth once said in one of her many speeches. Life is a hard battle anyway. If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight of freedom, it makes it all go easier. I will not let my life's light be determined by the darkness around me.

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Sojourner Truth refused to let her joy be diminished by the unjust conditions in which she lived and her joy, her laughter and singing were deeply rooted in her values and the beliefs and the work she was called to do to create more justice and in her connections in the good fight to others who were called to do that work with her. And certainly Sojourner Truth and other enslaved people knew more about the world's darkness than I hope any of us ever will. But if she could advocate for claiming joy. And surely we can, too. Another revolutionary anarchist who claimed Joy was in a Goldman when she said. If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution. I love that one. So let's sing and dance and look at stars as acts of tapping into the wellspring of joy, as acts of defiance and resistance against the world's injustice because as people of conscience and faith, the work we are called to do to revolutionize the world called by our talents and the world's needs, it is hard and it is exhausting. And if we are people of color or people on the margins at all, that work can be almost unbearable. But joy is there for us to sustain us to fuel us. Activist and poet Ali Mulgrew says this in one of her poems that the revolution will be fueled only by our joy.

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Joy sustains us. And I want to be clear again, that I do not mean joy as some sort of toxic positivity or shallow happiness that smiles and looks away and says everything is fine while the world burns. No, I mean joy as a force of life that compels us to grab a bucket and sing while we work with other people to put the fire out. This joy? This life giving joy that is deep in our hearts is the joy I claimed when I finally answered yes, yes to my minister's question, this joy is what led me to wellsprings because when I was searching for an internship, I found you. You with your mission to be a community charged fall with the charge of the spirit, which I interpreted to mean that you are claiming joy. You are spreading joy. You are working together in joy. And I've seen that I've seen that in a few short months, I have been here, wellsprings, I've seen you come together and shared purpose. Despite the uncertainties of the world, I have seen you support and sustain each other in moments when you needed rest. I have seen you come together not as busy work, but in acts of true service. I joined the Heart Works team, and while I'm still primarily in Wisconsin, I mostly get to observe their work. But here's what I've seen of artworks who are led so skillfully. And yes, I will say it joyfully by Sandy Tucker.

[00:24:00] Speaker1

In the past two months, they have worked tirelessly to collect clothes and supplies for the neediest people in this community and in their email messages and group texts. They have problem solved and creatively figured out how to get things done, and they have celebrated each other and joyfully supported each other in that work. And that that doing what they can do, what we can do in this moment is all we can ever do because the magnitude of the entire work of the world is too much. And we know the work needs to be done no matter how we feel, but we do ourselves a disservice if we think how we feel doesn't matter, so how we feel needs to be fueled by joy. Because the point the point of any of our lives is if we are not making room for joy, then what are we making room for? We need each of us individually and collectively, we need joy. We need to notice it. We need to nourish it. We need to let it fill us up in bubbling waves and in deep, quiet pools of connection. Because the world has too much disconnection, there is too much pain. What the world needs is healing. It needs more singing and dancing. The world needs us to be present to joy in all of its forms. In the first breath, a baby takes and in a loved one's last.

[00:25:38] Speaker1

In the quiet of winter nights and the everyday miracle of a sunrise. The world needs us to answer the call, to deploy, to do what we love with love. The world needs us to tap into the joy so that when we are asked when we are asked, Do you know that joy connects you? We will say yes when we are asked, Do you think you deserve joy? We can say yes. And when we are asked, Where is your joy? We can say, here among us flowing deep, deep in our hearts to stay. May it be so. Will you enter into a spirit of prayer with me? Spirit of life and love. Creative force of the universe that moves within us all. We are grateful, grateful that our you. You faith and this wellsprings community calls us to ease the burden of others. To bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. Let us together answer that call. And also to hear the call of joy. Spirit, move in our hearts and remind us always that joy and celebration and play are means of replenishment. Let us remember that we'll have nothing to give if we don't make room for getting filled up. Today's spirit. Fill us up with joy. Let us make room for that joy in each moment that comes. Amen. If you enjoy this message and would like to support the mission of Wellsprings. Go to our web site WellspringsUU.org, that's wellsprings the letters u u dot ORG

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