

TEXT: Lectionary Readings
THEME: With your face you fill me with delight
SUBJECT: Joy
TITLE: Paths of Life

Second Sunday of Easter
19 April 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

In the Gospel and epistle readings for today, life and joy are the result of believing in what cannot be seen. Peter declares, “You have not seen him, yet you love him; and still without seeing him you believe in him and so are already filled with joy so glorious that it cannot be described” (1 Peter 1:8, NJB).

In the reading from Acts (during the season of Easter, the first lesson is from Acts rather than from Hebrew Scripture) and in the Psalm, life and joy follow from following a particular way of life. “You have made known to me the paths of life, with your face you will fill me with delight” (Act 2:28; Hart’s translation). “Make me know the path of life. Joys overflow in Your presence, delights in your right hand forever” (Psalm 16:11; Alter’s translation).

Evelyn Underhill, a poet, novelist and well known writer on mysticism, lived from 1875 to 1941. She believed a well ordered natural life is the only sound basis for a healthy spiritual life. When faith, love, and hope elude us, it is time to pay attention to how we are living.

But learning to live in ways that lead to life and joy is not a walk in the park. David Bentley Hart describes the challenge: “Anyone who plays the game of life in life’s house knows that the invisible figure hidden in the impenetrable shadows on the far side of the baize table not only never shows his hand, but never lets us see the stakes of the wager, and in fact never tells us the rules. I am not denying that there is such a thing as revelation; but I do deny that very many of us can claim to have been accorded such a thing directly. The real, unmistakable, ultimately irrefutable revelation of reality to all of us is one that as yet lies ahead, at the unimaginable moment when - and in that undiscoverable place where - we will no longer see all things as in a glass darkly, but will instead be granted a vision of reality ‘face to face’” (David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, p 180).

Only when the game is over will we know irrefutably; in the meantime we pray for knowledge of the truth. We are not, however, left completely in the dark. Underhill believes steps can be taken to order our lives for the apprehension of truth.

When we cannot believe, we can cultivate the virtues, first among them prudence (discretion). Why is prudence first? Because, says Thomas Aquinas, prudence governs the other virtues. Prudence determines what to choose and what to avoid.

Each of us is born with a solitary task to fulfill and those we meet on our way help or hinder us in its completion. We might remember Mr. Rogers advice, “Look for the helpers.”

Prudence is love choosing wisely, choosing what helps and rejecting what hinders the fulfillment of our vocation. Prudence takes the future into account. It is fidelity to the future.

Temperance, another old fashioned sounding word, is the second sign post on the paths leading to life and joy. Temperance orders our unruly impulses and subjects our inordinate desires to the rule of love. It is not a matter of refusing to enjoy ourselves or enjoying ourselves as little as possible. On the contrary, the greater joy lies in the use of things, in taking pleasure in them as far as possible, but not to the point where we are disgusted with them, for there is no pleasure in that.

Temperance, which is moderation in sensual desires, promises purer or more fulfilling pleasures. It is enlightened, mastered, cultivated taste. Temperance is that moderation which allows us to be masters of our pleasure instead of becoming its slaves. It is free enjoyment and hence better enjoyment, for it enjoys its own freedom as well.

Fortitude (courage) is the third sign post on the paths leading to life and joy. The easiest way to avoid testing that requires courage or to avoid suffering that requires fortitude, strength, and staying-power, is to avoid commitment. The first law of the spiritual life is that the moment we commit to a particular practice - generosity, prayer, meditation on scripture, fasting, compassion - is the moment resistance arises, both internally and externally.

Fortitude is the steady endurance, Underhill writes, born of the humble sense that everything which happens matters, yet only matters because it mediates God. Whatever happens offers a never to be repeated opportunity of improving our cooperation with God. Fortitude is the foundation, not of a fair weather life, but of a life able to withstand the storms that assail us all.

The fourth marker of the paths leading to life and joy is justice. Of the four markers, justice is probably the only one that is an absolute good in itself. Prudence, temperance, and fortitude are virtues only when they serve good ends. What is just is aligned to the truth. Acts that are just are acts that respond appropriately to reality, that give what is needed for life and flourishing.

French philosopher Émile-Auguste Chartier writes, "Justice does not exist. Justice belongs to the realm of things that must be done precisely because they do not exist. Justice will exist if we act with justice."

This is true of prudence, temperance, and fortitude as well. We cannot see prudence in itself, only as it manifests itself in action. Take a photograph of prudence and send it to me, please. But do we refuse to believe in these virtues because we cannot see them? Augustine warns that refusing to believe what we cannot see ends with human relationships

thrown into chaos, and the foundations of society utterly swept away by our failure to trust what is impossible for us to actually see.

Thomas courageously declared, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas’ wish is granted. For the rest of us, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

What can we do when we cannot believe? We can order our lives by cultivating the virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. Ordering our natural life through the practice of these virtues creates within us the disposition for faith, love and hope.

The real, unmistakable, ultimately irrefutable revelation of reality lies at the unimaginable moment when - and in that undiscoverable place where - we will no longer see all things in a glass darkly, but will instead be granted, like Thomas, a vision of reality “face to face.” This meeting “face to face” will fill us with delight and joy unspeakable, for it is the realization of the end for which we were created.

PRAYER: St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897)

Your Holy Face becomes my home,
the radiance of my days, my realm
and sunlit land, where - all my life -
I raise a murmur, uttering Your praise. As lilies
carpeting the valley floor, You fill
the air with mystic scent, which I breathe in
whenever I grow faint; it gives sufficient
foretaste of the peace that is to come.
Your Visage bearing this immortal grace
is like most holy myrrh to me. It is my
music and my instrument, my rest
and resting place, my all and everything - Your Face.