

Celebration: Confronting Complaining with Gratitude

Working Out Our Faith (At Home)

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I don't know what your entertainment practices have been like during this season. For me, I've been taking in two things. One is I'm watching *Lost* for the first time ever (and I may never sleep again). But it's the other one that has more stirred my soul: John Krasinski's *Some Good News*. (You might know Krasinski as Jim Halpert from *The Office*). Now, using a super-simple set and a branding sign painted by his children, he's been putting out 20-minute news-anchor-like episodes of "good vibes stories" from all over the country in the midst of the pandemic. Last month he hosted a prom for the class of 2020, who are having all the great milestone moments and expectations of their senior year fall like dominoes at the feet of Covid-19. He had a bunch of artists like Billie Eilish, Chance the Rapper, and the Jonas Brothers perform, live, so that everyone could experience it together.

As a mom whose kid is losing her senior year highlights, and feeling all the disappointment of that, I wanted to burst with thankfulness for that dumb little episode, because it wasn't a dumb little episode. The smile it put on my daughter's face, the lift it brought, the ability to turn a deeply disappointing thing into also a uniquely cool event, I felt downright emotional. Billie Eilish's brother, Phineas, took a minute to thank Krasinski for what he was doing, saying: "This is such a 'dad thing' to do, nobody would do this but a dad, thank you man." And then I cried like a baby at a stupid little 20-minute, home-produced, online, want-to-be prom, because it is such a dad thing to do and good dads doing good-dad things gets me every time. Because I don't care if it's John Krasinski or some musician doing it, I recognize the heartbeat of God when I see it and it gets me every time. It's light poking through darkness. That was a good night.

There are so many emotions swirling in the air these days and so many unknowns. We're not sure what we can be sure of. Whether it's uncertainty about the virus itself being one the world has never seen before. Not knowing when or how restrictions are going to be lifted. The question mark of a vaccine. Our evolving knowledge keeps evolving the rules. What we thought we knew yesterday changes today. It's so easy to get frustrated, to lose your bearings. It's easy to let all of that pull you slowly and steadily into a state of semi-exhausted confusion,

disappointment, anger, worry and fear. We're losing so much and it's hard. Good times these days trying to maintain emotional equilibrium, isn't it?

And yet while the pandemic is giving us lots of opportunity to practice these emotions, they're anything but new to us. The human brain is a master at locating, magnifying and obsessing on what's negative or scary in the environment around us. Our brains are actually more skilled at negativity than positivity. Part of that's an evolutionary hand-me-down from cave dwelling times when acute alertness to any and all potential danger could literally save your life. We needed it then, less so now, and yet people tend to see what they look for. So our biological drive to scan constantly for danger reinforces our negative belief that bad things are out there everywhere. The brain also stores negative experiences much easier than positive ones. Researchers say positive events usually need to be held in awareness for a dozen or more seconds to transfer from short-term memory buffers to long-term storage. Whereas negative ones attach an implant almost immediately. That seems unfair, but it's true. So what do we do with that?

Just piling on the good news here. Every time you engage in an action, or thought pattern, a pathway is created in your brain. A literal groove gets cut. The brain likes efficiency, so it prefers to travel a pathway that's already been formed. Every time it does that, it then makes that groove even deeper - creating a superhighway or waterslide. Traveling down the same path gets easier and easier. Carving out a new one gets harder and harder. That's why habits are so powerful. Your brain can literally work for you or against you. That's great news when you're creating spiritual routines and rhythms for practice-based faith (which is what this *Working Out Our Faith* series is all about). The bad news: when you give into the temptation to worry and complain and think about the negative again and again, we see what we look for and when we just accept that and roll with it, it becomes harder and harder to see anything else, even when those negative feelings are killing our quality of life.

The truth is our emotions are often big fat liars. They poorly interpret the data around us. They assign all kinds of meaning where it doesn't exist. They're terrible at predicting the future and they lock us into a kind of tunnel vision that eliminates so much more light and hope and goodness. That is also true even in

the worst of circumstances. The prophet Jeremiah said, *“The heart is deceitful above all else and beyond cure, who can understand it?”* I hate flying. Anytime I get onto an airplane, I am 98% sure that flight can only end with me meeting Jesus face to face. Now I'm a fairly rational person. I can understand the safety of flying, but it doesn't matter. Fear absolutely vibrates through my whole body. Every feeling I have says I'm in mortal danger and there's like a tiny shred of truth in that - all travel involves some risk - but my emotions take that shred and magnify it times a thousand.

I remember once we were taking off and the weather was miserable. It was overcast, dreary, raining, and I'm thinking, “What a lousy day to go meet Jesus.” But as the plane climbed up and up, it passed through the cloud cover and all of a sudden there was bright blue sky and brilliant blinding sunlight flooding the cabin and I sat there shocked. Oh, it's not a miserable day. It's actually very sunny. We were just under some cloud cover and I know that's ridiculous because it's always sunny when it's day, but it was one of those moments when God was trying to show me something by showing me something. My perspective was off, my emotions were lying, and they were stopping me from seeing the bigger truth.

Emotions are important cues. They tell us something about what's true. They just don't tell us everything that's true. When we're stuck in circumstances or seasons of difficulty, it becomes difficult to believe that anything else could be true. There are really rough things going on in the world right now. That's true and actually that's usually the case. Maybe not in such an extreme and collective way, but to be human is to have trouble. It's part of the deal, but what is also true is that there is an overwhelming amount of light in the world - of things to rejoice at, and be thankful for always, because God is good and God is still God over and through it all. Our need to see light isn't canceled out by dark seasons. Our need to see and celebrate light only gets bigger in the middle of that. We just have to get better at light spotting - more intentional, more proactive, more disciplined at seeing and naming the goodness in our lives that comes from God, the deep things that we are and can be grateful for.

That's exactly what Jeremiah did. In Lamentations, he says:

“...my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his

**compassions never fail. They are new every morning;” Lamentations 3:
20-23 [NIV]**

In the midst of the most terrible circumstances that he and his country had ever lived through, Jeremiah still finds the energy and will to pause, notice, and be grateful for, the ways in which God's love is still real, still dependable, still flowing every single morning. That's what it looks like to be a light spotter. In her book *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass says,

“Gratitude, at its deepest and perhaps most transformative level, is not warm feelings about what we have. Instead, gratitude is the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, that we are, that in the multi-billion-year history of the universe, each one of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness and has a story. Life is the gift. When that mystery fills our hearts, it overwhelms us and a deep river of emotions flows forth, feelings we barely knew we were capable of holding. We can walk through trouble and still anchor ourselves in hope, allowing God to lift us up into a higher truer perspective where the light is clearer, and the sky is bluer. A place of gratitude and trust centered in him who is unshakable no matter our circumstances. Even in times like this, especially in times like this.”

Which is why, as counterintuitive as it seems, one of the best antidotes to a season of difficulty and turmoil (and the danger they pose to our heart) is to engage in the spiritual discipline of “Celebration.” Celebration feels like it should be a spontaneous emotional response to something great happening. That's how most of us usually treat it, but that's not how the apostle Paul thinks about celebration. In the tiny book of Philippians, there are 16 references to joy. It's the “joy book,” if ever there was one. It's also the “overcoming obstacles” book at the same time. I don't think that's a coincidence. Paul is writing this letter from inside a jail cell, literally in chains. Paul was imprisoned and beaten multiple times. Eventually martyred, he's writing from the middle of one of those seasons:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near... Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -

think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4: 4-9 [NIV]

Paul isn't ignoring his pain, but making a choice in the face of it, of what he'll make his foundation and where he'll point his eyes. He's urging us to look for light, knowing that it's everywhere, if we can just spot it

And he doesn't just point to supposedly Holy, spiritual things, he throws the doors open wider than that. If anything is excellent or praiseworthy. A church service is, hopefully, an excellent and praiseworthy thing that can lead you to an encounter with Christ. And so can a great meal cooked up by someone you love, enjoyed in the backyard under the stars. Paul is essentially saying, "whatever decent thing lifts the heart when held in the light of Christ, let it lift it, knowing that it can and will draw us closer to Jesus if that's where eyes are pointed. How good is that? And yet not only are we tempted to abandon celebration when times get tough, we often simply ignore it because it doesn't feel important, hard, holy, or "disciplinety" enough. But celebration is not optional fluff. It's a deep spiritual practice.

It's not extra icing on the cake, it's meat and it's strength. The Bible says, "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*" This is the thing that will sustain you in the Dark Valley. If you're feeling low on life these days I get why it feels like there's less reason to celebrate, but it might actually mean there's more of a need than ever. Not for all the things that are going well, but for the goodness of who God is and who we are with God. Our invitation is to celebrate the one who celebrates us and to let that be enough. Celebration is a perspective shift, it's a discipline and choice of hope, of trust and properly rooted joy. Practicing it changes you; not practicing it changes you. You're either moving more towards it or more away and your habit shapes your direction. So then the million dollar question is: "How do we get better at it, how do we train our eyes to look for it and train our body, mind and life to express it.

There are things we can do to raise our awareness of things to be grateful for. I'll offer a few. Keeping a gratitude journal is probably a concept you've heard of, maybe even rolled your eyes at (I know I have), and yet it works. It just does.

Starting or ending the day by making a simple list of the things you are grateful for can powerfully widen your perspective. Where did you glimpse God's goodness today? Where was there compassion, generosity, hope, love, simple kindness, in you or around you. Become a "light spotter." I've gone through seasons in my life when making a list of 10 things I'm genuinely thankful for (in the middle of otherwise horrible dynamics) has been an actual life saver and marriage saver and faith saver. We see what we look for. So, in the midst of trouble, learn to ask the question, "What else is also true?"

See, I make lists (as dorky as it sounds). Write down the things that you're grateful for. Make a practice of stopping three times a day and naming five things you're grateful for. Stop once a week and make a list of 10. Stop once a month and make a list of 30. See how much higher you can go. Inventory all the ways you know God has been faithful in the past. Use that to help drive your trust that he will be faithful again. I get into the practice of thanking people more often for whatever goodness they bring to the table (not fake flatter). Genuinely practice slowing down enough to notice those around you to let their intrinsic value and beauty and quirkiness affect your heart. And then say it, whether in a one sentence comment or a full-page letter that's gratitude and celebration all in one. Train your eyes to look for light instead of trouble and make that your habit. Increase your own awareness of the good God things around you and then train your body, mind and life to express them in deep and wild and free and warm and fun and crazy ways.

Celebrate like your life depends on it, cause maybe it does. And again, there are a million ways to do this. When you come into worship, participate wholeheartedly. Let your heart burst. When something great happens, stop your life and spend the 12 seconds holding it in your awareness so it sticks, and then laugh or sing your dance or whatever the moment requires. Make art. Write a song, paint a picture, frame some photos, give a bunch of gifts away to people who aren't expecting it, just because God's been that good to you. Do it anonymously. Walk in nature. Visually savour things. Play great music and let it move you. read a Bob Goff book. That man is pathological when it comes to joy. Hang around more joyful people. Get good at throwing parties big or small.

When celebration is easy, don't take that for granted. Treat it like wind suddenly picking up on the Lake. Figure out how to hoist the sail and lean into it. Build the muscle in the good times so that it still functions for you in the bad times. And when it's harder, when gratitude and celebration are a deep struggle, it becomes an act of faith - a defiant declaration of trust. When you're under the clouds that you know the sun is still up there. Celebrate anyway, not with happy, "clappy," fake cheerfulness, but by focusing your eyes and digging deep inside and wrapping your hands around a different kind of joy - deep-seated, Christ-centered, full of stubborn hope and unshakable trust in the God you know. And that's a good time to let the art of others carry you. Structured prayers, songs and psalms worshiped, surrounded by the community of faith like today.

And we do all of these things as deep, meaningful, essential spiritual disciplines. A party is a spiritual practice when pointed in the right direction. It's all about the orientation of your heart, your attention and affection turn up towards God as you're doing whatever you're doing. Celebration is also often best as a corporate practice, which doesn't mean it's meant for business, but that it's meant for us together as opposed to be a solo practice. Like silence, gratitude and celebration are both naturally attached to relationship. Gratitude only exists inside relationship because gratitude acknowledges a gift giver. This isn't positive, "pop psychology" just tossed out into the air. Gratitude here is a relational encounter and a practice of love with God and celebration just wants to be shared. Have you ever tried to keep good news to yourself? You can't, nor should you. Celebration was designed as a gift to us. Yours is mine and mine is yours. And when we engage in it that way, it's effect actually multiplies. Celebration matters. So practice it deeply and in that spirit we want to share with you a few stories of some good news from around our own community.

I once heard someone ask, what if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday? I would love to live my life in a way that that's not a scary question. I'd love to live my life in a way that my eyes are constantly being opened to the awesome beauty, magic possibility, and light that God is constantly pouring out around us in every season. That is not an impossible goal. It's completely within our grasp. Can you imagine what living that life would feel like? This has been a season of many things being removed from us, some of them painful. And it's thrown us a bit off kilter. But I pray that that loss and deprivation

would lead us not into frustration and fear, but into a deeper, truer, more vibrant appreciation of how many, and how valuable, the gifts are that we have, the gifts of each other, the gifts of our lives, and the gift of our God. Because holding those things makes me want to celebrate now more than ever. And I'd rather, than me simply praying to close one, to give you a minute to search your mind for, say, three things that you're grateful for right now, today, and for you to express those to God in the quiet of your heart. And then I'll pray for all of us. So take a minute to say thanks.

Father, we thank you for your powerful and tender care over each one of us. Would you keep opening our eyes to who you are, to who we are with you, to the crazy depth of that gift and everything it means more than anything? We thank you for Jesus, for his life gave us back our lives. We thank you for his death and resurrection for the very, very good news wrapped up in that, that we will be celebrating for the rest of our lives and into eternity.

Amen.