

## **“Joy as Resistance”**

Homily by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

June 9, 2024

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

### **Reading “Peonies” by Mary Oliver**

This morning the green fists of the peonies are getting ready  
to break my heart  
as the sun rises,  
as the sun strokes them with his old, buttery fingers...

Do you love this world?  
Do you cherish your humble and silky life?  
Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden,  
and softly,  
and exclaiming of their dearness,  
fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,  
their eagerness  
to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are  
nothing, forever?

### **Homily**

This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it, and the world can't take it away.

These words were first sung by gospel singer, Shirley Caesar, in 1975 and then recently popularized by the Resistance Revival Chorus, founded in the wake of the 2017 Women's March.

This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it, and the world can't take it away.

What does it mean to have a joy that can't be taken away?

What does it mean to have a sturdy kind of joy that is always available in both the brightest and the bleakest of times?

I feel this kind of sturdy joy whenever I pass a lilac bush and am engulfed by its sweet fragrance. Ahhhh.

I feel this kind of sturdy joy witnessing the peonies that I transplanted several years ago thriving and still making buds and blooms in their new home.

I feel this kind of sturdy joy when I'm dancing with friends, arms waving, legs pumping, hips swaying. Paying no attention to the voice of the inner critic anxious about my moves. Now, that's a good kind of joy.

I feel this kind of sturdy joy anytime I get on my bicycle and feel the wind rush past and the delight of my heart pounding, the joy overriding the fear that I once felt being chased by a group of teenagers while on my bike when I was a small child.

I feel this kind of sturdy joy when I gather with others in protest and song to resist injustice and declare a vision of peace, wholeness, and thriving for all regardless of how steep the hill to victory might seem.

Joy might seem frivolous when the world's woes are so great.  
Yet, joy reminds us what is worth protecting and fighting for.  
Joy is life animated and whole.  
Holy in delight.  
Goodness and blessing revealed.

When we sing that the world can't take away our joy, we are implicitly acknowledging that there are forces that are trying to do so.

There are homogenizing forces that insist that being anything but heterosexual, stereotypically male or female, able-bodied, and white is a deviation from what is good.

There are depriving forces that insist that people live in a constant state of insufficiency barely able to get by.

There are violent forces that pit us against one another stealing lives to maintain power.

In the Book of Joy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama insist that joy and suffering go hand in hand. It is in the shadow of pain and sorrow that the light of joy can shine brightest.

I have witnessed this at almost every memorial service I have officiated where so often tears and laughter intermingle as we feel the sorrow of loss alongside the joy of having had the chance to know our beloved, to be graced by their presence and all the idiosyncrasies that made them who they were.

And, alongside the pain and anguish of the police raid at the Stonewall Inn in New York City fifty-five years ago, wasn't there also joy? Joy in the spirits of those who refused to be battered and silenced. Joy in the decades before and after of LGBT resistance and insistence on the worth and sacredness of every body.

Embracing the fullness of our joy despite the ways that we experience hardship, injustice, or oppression is a form of resistance. It is a declaration of human wholeness and dignity. And, it is a way of surviving that which would otherwise tear us apart.

The poet Ross Gay writes: "My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common, we love...noticing what we love in common, and studying that, might help us survive."

"...noticing what we love in common, and studying that, might help us survive."

What, in common, do we love?

Do we love the gentle folds of the peony?  
Do we love the wordless gurgling of the infant child?  
Do we love all the children in every land?  
Do we love the brook and the creek, the lake and the stream?  
Do we love the elder with their wisdom, the youth with their defiance?  
Do we love this earth, this life, this moment?

This annual flower communion service traditionally marks the end of our church year and our going forth into the summer season of rest and play.

Let me tell you that I need this service every year. I need this chance to open my own heart to joy because, frankly, I'm not always feeling it. And there have been many moments lately when joy has felt far away and out of reach.

But, in this service especially, we celebrate our love of the holy and the beautiful found in the natural world and within this very community. In this service, we give ourselves over to joy.

Together, we live into the much needed and urgent truth that joy is ours, that joy can't be taken away, that joy leads to love and love is survival.

And so, I invite you today and in the days ahead to open your hearts to witness the pain and the sorrow, your own and others', and also to let the joy seep in.

Let it pour into every crack and crevice of your broken heart.

Let joy enliven you.

Let joy inspire you.

Let joy move you towards the ways of justice and peace.

Let joy compel you to protect and save what and who you can.

Let this sturdy joy steady you and ready you, for like the peony, you are beauty the brave, blazing open.

So may it be.