

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**James 1: 1-18**  
**“Grace and Gratitude”**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 30, 2015**

Fred Craddock famously remarked in an address that he delivered at Union Seminary that some Christians find the New Testament book of James to be about as exciting as an okra sandwich. (1)

Martin Luther was one of these, calling James “a right strawy epistle.”

Not so with our theological forebear John Calvin whose prayer was our prayer for illumination today. Calvin, the father of the Reformed tradition in which we Presbyterians stand, was a fan of James, writing that James is “full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life.” (2)

Calvin was rightfully acknowledging that the author of James had no intention of publishing a volume of systematic theology for his readers. This was not his aim. James assumed that his readers were already familiar with the basic tenets of Christian faith. What he is trying to do is to empower his readers to grasp how to put their theology to work in their daily lives. (3)

In the opening verses of James, he instructs us in how we are to put our theology to work when we encounter life’s realities of suffering, tragedy, and loss.

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An old gospel song goes this way: “If you have a load of trouble, smile it through. It will burst just like a bubble, smile it through...God can make the wrong things right. God can change the darkest night...smile it through.”

The song is not in our hymnbook!

I say “thank goodness” for that. While I would never say that smiling doesn’t sometime help in a bad situation, it is also very true that if one lives long enough, experience teaches us sooner or later that simply pasting a smile on one’s face won’t burst the bubble of life’s difficulties and tragedies. Bad things do happen to good people, and being a Christian does not mean that we will be spared the realities of pain, loss, and humiliation.

Not long ago, someone said to me, “As the Bible says, God never gives us more than we can handle.” It was not the first time that someone has said this to me, and more often than not, when it is said in my hearing, I let it pass because I trust that the person who is speaking is doing so out of the kindness of her heart and means for her words to offer solace. But this time, it was said by someone who was speaking to me in her professional role as a social worker for hospice and my father was suffering mightily in the next room and I, his daughter, could not simply smile away his intense and raw suffering and impending death. And so, after thanking her for her concern, I said as gently as I could, “but you know, the Bible never says that.”

“It doesn’t,” she responded incredulously. “No.” “I’ll have to look it up.” We talked some more, and, to her great credit, she thanked me for the conversation, saying that she wanted to learn everything that she could about the Bible in order to be a more faithful Christian and a more able social worker.

James refutes both the first part and the second part of the statement. He refutes the first part of the statement, that is, the part that imputes the placing of suffering of a person to God. He writes in verse 13 that no one should say, “I am being tested by God...for God tests no one.”

And as for the second part of the statement that we never are faced with more than we can handle: James is keenly aware that experiences of suffering can provoke crises of faith. In fact, the first thing that he holds before readers in his letter is a perspective with which to face the difficulties and tragedies of human life. (4)

And so let us move to James’s perspective on suffering and his counsel to us.

Fresh out of the starting gate, James writes, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.”

The trials that James envisions here are not specifically identified. In fact, they are deliberately referred to as “trials of any kind,” according to the NRSV translation from which I have read today. Other translations refer to them as “various” or “diverse.” Thus, everything from experiences of life and death existence that Christians in Syria are facing today to the shaming comment that is directed your way at work and eats at you and derails your

sense of self-worth and results in your being totally unproductive for an entire afternoon could be subsumed under this heading.

So what is James advising exactly when he says “consider it nothing but joy whenever you face trials of any kind”? Is he promoting, as Union Seminary professor Frances Taylor Gench asks rhetorically, “a milk-toasty martyr complex”? Is he suggesting that Christians are to take actual pleasure in suffering?

By no means!

The experiences of pain, loss, or oppression that Christians encounter are not at all occasions for joy in and of themselves. Such experiences are not to be sought. At the same time, when they occur, they are not to be avoided or regarded as foreign to the Christian faith.

In what sense, then, can trials be counted as joy? (5)

In response to this question, “in what sense can suffering be counted as joy?” I offer three examples, three stories, with the hopeful prayer that one or two or all three of them will hook into your own life experience and illumine your own experience of suffering, joy, and faith. The first comes from perhaps the most well-known of our present-day theologians and public moral intellectuals. The second comes from the experience of Hurricane Katrina on the occasion of yesterday’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster. The third contains a snippet of my own personal story.

First, the theologian...Stephen Colbert. I would imagine that many of you have read the recent GQ article by writer Joel Lovell. Lovell writes that what took him by surprise in his in-depth conversations with the notoriously unserious Colbert: “The thing I’ve been thinking about the most since my time with Colbert is loss,” and how he spoke about turning unimaginable tragedy into a source of joy.

“Tragedy is sacred. People suffering is sacred,” Colbert told Joel Lovell, reflecting upon his experience of returning to his hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, to lay flowers at the steps of Emanuel A.M.E. and join the peace march across the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge and then linking it to his own personal experience of suffering, that is, the death of his father and his two brothers in a plane crash when he was 10 years old.

Colbert was completely traumatized by the death of his father and his brothers, of course. And one way to deal with such trauma, he acknowledged in his conversations with Joel Lovell, is to be indifferent in return. But Stephen Colbert was raised in a deeply Catholic intellectual family, and his Catholic faith, the faith which was exemplified in his mother’s life, became the lens through which he interpreted his experience of trauma and loss.

He was tracing an arc on the table with his fingers and speaking with such deliberation and care. “I was left alone a lot after Dad and the boys died.... And it was just me and Mom for a long time,” he said. “And by her example am I not bitter. By her example. She was not. Broken, yes. Bitter, no.” Maybe, he said, she had to be that for him. He has said this before—that even in those days of unremitting grief, she drew on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering, ourselves, in the light of eternity. What is this in the light of eternity? Imagine being a parent so filled with your own pain, and yet still being able to pass that on to your son.

Colbert went on to speak about meeting Del Close, the legendary improv teacher and mentor and champion of the idea that improvisational comedy, when performed purely, was in fact high expressive art.

“I went, ‘I don’t know what this is, but I have to do it,’ ” he said. “I have to get up onstage and perform extemporaneously with other people.” He was part of the same Second City class that included Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello and Chris Farley. “Our first night professionally onstage,” he said, the longtime Second City director Jeff Michalski told them that the most important lesson he could pass on to them was this: “You have to learn to love the bomb.”

“It took me a long time to really understand what that meant,” Colbert said. “It wasn’t ‘Don’t worry, you’ll get it next time.’ It wasn’t ‘Laugh it off.’ No, it means what it says. You gotta learn to love when you’re failing.... The embracing of that, the discomfort of failing in front of an audience, leads you to penetrate through the fear that blinds you.

‘You gotta learn to love the bomb,’ ” he said. “Boy, did I have a bomb when I was 10. That was quite an explosion. And I learned to love it. So that’s why. Maybe, I don’t know. That might be why you don’t see me as someone angry and working out my demons onstage. It’s that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened.”

And as a reminder to continue to love the thing that he most wishes had never happened, he has a note taped to his computer. It reads, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the existence of God.” (6)

Or as James writes, “my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.”

The tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina has given us glimpse into yet another example of how God's grace can manifest itself as joy in suffering.

Nearly every Saturday night in Marigny, just outside the French Quarter, a crowd gathers on Frenchmen Street to hear John Boutte sing. They've been coming to the d.b.a. club for 15 years. And Boutte's may be the only live music show in town where the audience is this quiet, respectful — kind of like church.

Michael Garran, a manager at the club, has watched Boutte's audience balloon ever since the flood.

"In addition to being extremely talented, he is brutally honest and he doesn't put on airs," Garran says. "And he doesn't really kowtow to anyone. A lot of people respect that."

The levee failures — as horrific as they were — made Boutte's career. He emerged as one of the city's most likable truth-tellers. In the early days, Boutte's set list included encouraging numbers like the American Songbook classic "Pick Yourself Up" — "take a deep breath — and start all over again ... "

But he also mocked former FEMA chief Michael Brown and former president George W. Bush in song.

"I did some angry songs, like Stevie Wonder's 'You Haven't Done Nothin',' " Boutte says. He quotes the lyrics: " 'We are amazed but not amused by all the things you say that you do.' That's how I felt."

Boutte lost most of his possessions in the floodwater, but fortune smiled when one of his original compositions became the theme song to the HBO series Treme.

At 56 years old, he's now a first-time homeowner. Boutte calls these past 10 years the "best and worst" of his life.(7)

Or as James would say, "whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy."

And now to conclude with a scrap of my own personal story.

The year was 1984. I had been serving as the associate pastor of a wonderful suburban church in Jacksonville, Florida, for 5 years. I had worked with a superb head of staff and able lay leaders who cut me more slack than this wet-behind-the-ears young pastor ever deserved, had learned a lot, and was ready to try my wings as a solo pastor.

And, as God's providence would have it, a Pastor Nominating Committee had discerned that God was calling me to serve as their pastor.

I was over the moon.

Everything seemed perfect.

Being called to serve a church in the very same city where I was living at the time meant that my husband would not have to find a new job in a new city and my three-year-old son would be able to remain in the loving care of the beloved caregiver he called Ma-Na, and we could take our time in finding just the right house in which to live on the other side of the St. John's River.

But the word leaked out that the Pastor Nominating Committee was going to call a woman. And that wasn't okay with a significant segment of the congregation, and when the vote was taken, the majority had voted against the person that their elected Pastor Nominating Committee had recommended.

Talk about rejection. Rejection is always hard. Public rejection is even harder. Not only was I being publicly rejected in my own town, but I had to crawl (and that is the way I envisioned it) back to my congregation that I told I was leaving to become a solo pastor and say, "Well, you remember how I told you I was leaving. I'm not. Will you have me back?"

It was what Brené Brown calls a face-down-in-the-arena moment.

I do not mean to equate my disappointment with the trauma of the death of a father and two brothers or a massive hurricane. What I felt was immense shame. No one had died. At least not literally. But a part of me felt as if I had been led before the firing squad and put to an excruciating, public execution.

However, by God's grace, I began slowly but surely to see that the experience was, as James says, "a generous act of giving," an expression of God's grace. Or as Stephen Colbert put it, I came to love the bomb, to love the thing that I most wished had never happened.

For you see, up until that time I had spent a great deal of effort organizing my life around answering the question, "What will people think?" That experience was the first way station on a life-long journey of ministry that helped me to cut that out and has enabled me to say that God has given me, as God as given everyone, gifts and experiences that can be used to build up the church and, while I will disappoint people time and again, that is enough for God. And not only did the experience free me, but would you believe that two members of that Pastor Nominating Committee who experienced rejection even more personally than I eventually went to seminary themselves — one of them is Judy Gabel Roeling, the aunt of DCPC member Meredith Harris, and she served the

church as a pastor and a presbytery executive, and the other Jeff Welch is the pastor of Dunnellon Presbyterian Church in Dunnellon, Florida.

They learned to love the bomb too. This is not to say that I don't still have my moments. For example, several years ago, I went back to my office. Not fifteen minutes after worship, I checked my e-mail. There was an email from a radio listener pointing out a grammatical error I had made when I baptized a baby that morning, ending with a sarcastic, "really, Lib?" I was crushed for I am, after all, someone who worships at the altar of the Oxford comma. That email laid me out in the ditch of failure for a week at least! But God's grace is sufficient. (and that is in the Bible!). And God's grace pulled me out of the ditch, as God has done time and again and will do time and again for you and for me.

And for this, all of us can be deeply grateful, can't we?

1. Fred Craddock, "The Epistle of James and Christian Wisdom," an address delivered at the Conference on Interpreting the Faith, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA, July 15, 1981.
2. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, translated by John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 276.
3. Frances Taylor Gench, *James and the Integrity of Faith* (Louisville: Horizons/Presbyterian Women, 1992), 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Joel Lovell, "The Late, Great Stephen Colbert," *GQ*, August 17, 2015, <http://www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story>.
7. Gwen Thompkins, "A Decade After Flood's Devastation, Love Keeps New Orleans Afloat," <http://www.npr.org/2015/08/29/435524646/a-decade-after-floods-devastation-love-keeps-new-orleans-afloat>