

**THE CONNECTION BETWEEN JOY AND REPENTANCE; PHIL. 4:4-7, LUKE 3:7-18;
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Historian David McCullough, author of the best-selling *The Wright Brothers*, and many other works on American history said what he finds compelling as an historian is not just the grand achievements of those who shaped our nation but their human side, their flaws and weaknesses. It makes them more real, he said.

William Shakespeare, writing just after the Reformation, was also drawn to the machinations, for good and ill, of the human heart. Harold Bloom says by imitating essential human qualities in his characters – life size and larger than life – Shakespeare’s goal was to explore and even invent what it means to be human; his plays, Bloom says, bring life to mind and make us aware of parts of the soul we could not find without him.ⁱ

Shakespeare was writing at a time, in England, when to be anything but Anglican was grounds for scrutiny and possible punishment. It was also a time when Protestant theologians and Biblical scholars were redefining terms like faith, hope and love. It was perfectly natural, though not without some risk, for a great playwright to experiment with such essential, newly re-defined principles for living.

One critic tracks what she calls the affects of grace in many of Shakespeare’s plays which are found in his long and often complicated endings that occur for the sole purpose of bringing about reconciliation among the characters – some, who had succumbed to the temptations of greed, villainy and deception and others who had become their victims.

Shakespeare was fascinated with the Protestant notion that *agape* in the Greek or *caritas* in the Latin were to be equated with the everyday English word ‘love.’ This interpretation is clearly offered in the *Geneva Bible’s* translation of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians and elsewhere; this was the Bible with which Calvin and Shakespeare were intimately familiar.

If ‘charity’ was close to ‘love’ when the Bible was translated into the Latin Vulgate in the early church, the terms had drifted a long way from each other in Elizabethan England even as they remain distant in our time. To substitute love for charity in 1600 was a revelation.

What my critic, who refers to Shakespeare as a theologian, says, is that the great acts of grace at the end of many of his plays result in the restoration of lost loved ones – husband and wife, parent and child – through selfless acts of love, *caritas*, *agape*.

Thus, Shakespeare signaled the reality of another order; an order that pervades human experience and finds expression in common relationships. He never asserts but proposes that we participate in grace, in the largest sense of the word, as we experience love, in the largest sense of that word. Beauty masses around the moments when these thoughts are spoken and enacted.

It is worth noting that Shakespeare refers to none of the affects of grace as ‘Christian,’ for to have done so, would have waved the Protestant flag of reform in the face of the Anglican authorities.ⁱⁱ

The point of citing McCullough and Shakespeare's pre-occupation with human nature is to note, here in Advent, when we encounter John the Baptist calling for repentance and St. Paul in his remarkable admonition from a prison cell to 'rejoice in the Lord' – the point is, to remind us that we are more complex creatures than our image-obsessed social media would suggest; if all we had to go on were Facebook and Instagram postings picturing us gathered with friends at exotic destinations or lounging on vacation you might think we were a species fairly easy to satisfy.

Would that life were that simple! John the Baptist and St. Paul understood human nature as well as David McCullough and William Shakespeare. But the attention the Bible devotes to human nature in today's lessons surpasses historical interest or even literary genius; it is rather for the purpose of redeeming and restoring us to wholeness of life.

The lessons today juxtapose John's call to repentance with St. Paul's admonition to joy which, on the face of it, seems like an incongruous pairing but which in fact go hand in hand.

Given the gold Shakespeare mined from his *Geneva Bible* I turned, in preparation for today, to my *Geneva Bible* to see what revelations might be found in today's lessons. Indeed, I found some interesting insights.

It is immediately clear that John was not one to have the wool pulled over his eyes. He greets the crowds coming out from Jerusalem with the rather startling salutation: "You *generation* of vipers!" Most scholars say these are city dwellers, more sophisticated than John a figure from the surrounding desert. The *Geneva* translation refers not just to "you vipers" as we heard Phil read from the lectern Bible today, but to *the entire generation of that time* as "vipers"; naming the rampant deception and dishonesty of social and commercial life in Jesus' day was a good place to start to talk about redemption.

John knows the people know, as Jews, that they are living far short of the standards of Torah. They are lost, confused, spiritually hungry and ready, if necessary, to claim Abraham as their 'get out of jail' card to escape the wrath to come; wrath everyone feels in the air and that burst forth in the furious Roman defeat of the Maccabean revolt.

Disarmed by his ability to see through them they ask John what they should do; to which he builds on the message of last week – to repent or to literally in the Greek to 'turn around' and then to embark on a new path. To the tax collectors he advises not to take more than their rightful fee; to the soldiers he counsels "avoid violence"; to all he urges generosity with food and clothing for the poor.

When the people suggest that he is the Messiah, he quickly discredits the association and says he comes to announce *the advent of the Messiah* who will be stronger than he, and purer, whose sandal he is unworthy to untie.

The Christ who is coming, said John, will have his "fan" or sieve for winnowing grain (says the *Geneva* translation) – a lovely metaphor for the Gospel – and with the fan or truth of God's good news, he will separate grain from chaff, then clean the threshing floor, gathering the wheat and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

The passage from Philippians today is remarkable for its context – Paul is confined to a Roman prison and awaits what he might have expected to be his torture and death. Yet, he writes in verse 4, “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again, I say rejoice.”

This joy on the eve of his execution is the hallmark of Christian faith; it is the deep peace Jesus promises to give to his disciples at the Last Supper, peace the world does not know and cannot understand.

Here is verse 5 from the *Geneva Bible*: “Let your patient mind be known unto all. The Lord is at hand. Be nothing careful, but in all things let your requests be showed unto God in prayer and supplication with giving of thanks. And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall preserve your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

We tend to associate joy in our time with only positive and often self-serving experiences. What could possibly induce one to a condition of joy from a prison cell and possibly awaiting a death sentence?

On this point, the notes or commentary at the bottom of each page of the *Geneva Bible* are most helpful (remember this was one of the first Bibles translated into the common language for common people). Here is the translator commenting on verse 4: “The joy of the Philippians be not hindered by any afflictions that the wicked imagine and work against them.” [Both the Philippians and 17th century Protestants reading that passage well understood what afflictions and persecutions Paul and the commentator were talking about]. “So is our joy,” the notes go on, “distinguished from the world’s joy.” In other words, in dire circumstances fear and anxiety give way to moderate behavior and a settled mind as we heard in verse 5. Again the commentary counsels: “We must not be disquieted through impatience, seeing that God is at hand to give us remedy in time against all our miseries.”

Verse 6: “be not too careful in anything”; that is, pray with confidence, even “crave,” says the commentary, “whatsoever we have need of; so David oft began his prayers with tears and ended in thanksgiving.”

And if quietness of mind and prayer are practiced verse 7 reassures, God will extend peace to mind and heart which the commentary explains includes the will and affections, and our capacity to reason.

If we think of these early English translations of the Bible as merely quaint we completely miss the central role they played not only in literary history and the geopolitics that gave birth to democracy but also the fundamental way new and fresh translations of the Bible laid the foundation for the religious movements that swept across Europe and America and transformed people’s lives.

It is noteworthy that the *King James Bible* which appeared in 1611 was virtually word for word the *Geneva Bible* published in 1559; but without the *Geneva Bible’s* extensive commentary on the text.

It would seem that King James was pleased to claim what scholars today recognize as the beauty and supremacy of the *Geneva Bible’s* literary achievement but omit the notes that could and did lead to religious and political dissidence and rebellion.

It is easy to imagine those sixteenth and seventeenth English Puritans, Presbyterians and Congregationalists reading their *Geneva Bibles* – even the verses we have from Philippians today – and finding inspiration to rebel against Church of England and the persecutions and death sentences levied by the King’s officials.

If all of this seems like a very long way from Christmas – it is. But it resonates with the very core and purpose of Advent. As someone said, “If you want to get to the joy of Bethlehem and the praise of the baby Jesus, you must get past John the Baptist.” This is the third week in a row that the lessons have been occupied with that ‘lone voice crying out in the wilderness.’

If there is anything to learn today from John or St. Paul in his prison cell or Shakespeare captivated by the possibilities of agape love, it is that we are more complex creatures than our social media or the savvy marketers of the age are willing to grant; if we can’t sandwich our daily lives or the often too busy lives of our children into an Outlook spread sheet or MacBook calendar it is because we are more wondrous creatures than even the best software will allow.

But our wonder will go un-experienced unless we take to heart the simple message today to turn around and embark on a new path; unless we face our various trials and tribulations – and they seem for many of us to multiply and flourish just in time for the holidays – unless we approach our days with quiet minds and settled hearts grounded in prayer for what we need, not what we want.

It is in a state of deep peace that we are finally ready to welcome and encounter the One who comes not as a celebrity or clever Facebook posting but as a Savior.

The connection between repentance and joy is a continuum of spiritual reflection and daily acts of kindness that the lessons and music counsel today. They equip us not just to recognize Jesus when he arrives but to encounter and follow him.

William Sloane Coffin had a wonderful benediction I heard on more than one occasion – it still sticks with me: “Spirituality means living ordinary life extraordinarily well. As the old church father said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

That’s the goal of the Bible in all of its translations, that’s the goal of the Baptist’s preaching, that’s the goal of St. Paul’s writing from prison, and that’s the goal of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry –
to enable us to wake up and to become fully human, fully alive. Amen.

ⁱ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Books: New York, 1998)2ff.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux: New York, 2015) 73ff.