

The past few weeks we've been reading sections from what's known as Jesus's Farewell Discourse. It's a summary of his teachings, his wisdom that he wants to be sure the disciples hold onto, live out fully, and pass on after he's gone. He's given them the bad news, that he won't be with them much longer. And it is bad news, Jesus leaving them. He is the one that they have come to rely on and to love. And Jesus loves them. He assures the disciples that that they will not be alone, that they have his love, and that their lives have meaning. He is someone in whom they can find their home, and he makes his home in them whether or not he's physically present. He's leaving a community for them to be a part of and has made the promise of the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Today he says that he does not call them servant but gives them the promise of intimacy that comes with friendship.

It's in this context that Jesus gives them words of joy. Of joy. He is the one on whom they rely and find their meaning in life, and he is leaving them, but wants them to have the joy that he has. It seems ill-fitting – words of joy when he is also telling them about his suffering and death and his leaving. If he is so much a part of their source of joy, and he is to suffer death, how can they be expected to experience and look forward to living with joy?

Joy. It seems aloof. Distinguished from happiness because happiness is ethereal, momentary, unobtainable, fleeting, not quite real, just skin deep, not lasting. Joy, a solid experience of something deeper than happiness, is built on rock and not the disappearing sand.

Here's the thing. Joy is built into creation. The Genesis story tells over and over again the story of God's calling into creation one thing or another and calling it good. Joy is in the very being of God's whole creation, including us.

It reminds me of something my mother said once. About 10 months after my father died, she remarked that she had gone out at night, and for the first time in what seemed like a long time, she noticed the stars anew, and they were brilliant and beautiful. They were there all the while, but the the grief that was weighing her down helped her experience the stars as a new source of joy. Opportunities for joy are built into the very fabric of creation and yet we can miss what's right in front of us.

Joy can be hard to experience because we do get weighed down by so much else. There is a very old Christian practice that can help, though. Even amidst grief, disappointment, worry or any other difficulty, joy is a possibility. The Christian practice of the Daily Examen (or examen) is a quick reflection and prayer to help us see where God is active in our day. It's usually done at the end of the day and takes about 15 or 20 minutes. The prayer was made popular by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order and written out in his book called *The Spiritual Exercises*. There are five easy steps, and you should have instructions for the practice to take home. If you do the exercise every day, you'll begin to see God's presence in your life more easily, and where you see God's presence, you'll notice the joy that is built into the fabric of our existence.

I want to walk you through the steps and give you an example of reflecting on my day yesterday.

- Presence. Remember that you're always in the presence of God, but when you pray you are in God's presence in a special way. So begin Examen with a prayer for God's help in your life and in your prayer of the moment. So we begin with a short prayer. You might want to light a candle to set apart the time. A simple prayer might be, "God be with me now as I pay particular attention to your presence in my life".
- Gratitude. Think back over your day and remember 2 or 3 things that happened for which you are grateful. Some days it can be harder than others, but as you practice, you'll find it hard to stop giving thanks. Begin by inviting God's presence, and practice gratitude for the day's events in detail. Sit with the gratitude before moving on. Savor it. An example for me yesterday was having a whole, uninterrupted day to catch up from being out of town.
- Review. Look at your day from the time you awoke to when you began the Examen practice. Is there a time during the day when you felt God's presence? When did you offer a prayer? When did you experience love? When did you give love? Was someone Christ to you? Did you offer the face of Christ to another person? An example for me was looking books written by theologians who had given their lives to helping me and others understand our relationship with God better so that I might be Christ to another.
- Sorrow. In looking at your day, is there anything that you regret? An unkind word, a missed opportunity to tell someone you love them, something that needs an apology or even an extension of forgiveness or asking for forgiveness. As I was reflecting, I realized how rude I'd been to someone the day before in my frustration of traveling home. Forgive me, Lord. As I practice repentance and feel God's acceptance and grace, I can then pray for myself and remember that the other person is just as beloved of God as I am. I can then pray for the other person.
- Grace. God's grace abounds in our lives and the life of the world. Is there something that has surfaced during your time of Examen that is particularly meaningful? Talk a little more about it with God. Give God thanks for the grace in your own life and ask for God's grace for the following day.

Practicing Examen is not so much about what happens when you sit down to practice it. It's the development of a habit that gives us new eyes and ears and heart to notice and experience God in our everyday lives. It is one way of abiding with God and inviting God to abide with us. Through examining our day and God's action in our lives, we form a new habit and as we develop the habit, we change and we have a better chance of experiencing joy and the abundant life that Jesus talks about wanting for all of us, not just as we reflect but every day. By the way, practicing Examen with children is a wonderful way to teach them about prayer. We used to call it "Highs and Lows" and we sat around the dinner table to look at our days.

Like we do in our own lives from time to time, the disciples were experiencing chaos, disappointment, grief, and frustration. Perhaps what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel lesson is that he wants them to live with joy, regardless of the circumstances. Joy is a gift that cannot be obtained, but received, a grace that is not dependent on

circumstances or on making the “right” choices, but on God’s choosing us. Joy comes because God has chosen us to love, and to spread that same love to the world, and nothing can separate us from that love. The circumstances of our lives cannot remove the joy that is ours to have. We can be secure in God’s love even when it seems like we are in the darkest places possible, and we can be assured that we abide in God because God abides in us. Joy is the recognition of God’s grace that is active and alive in our lives – that all shall indeed be well. Whether or not Examen or any other spiritual practice is the right way for you to practice the acceptance of joy, joy is yours. It’s part of creation and part of who we are in Christ. Amen.