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Joy that Gathers

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**Hebrews 12:1** Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Heb 12:1-4 NRS)

I will draw on this passage of scripture to consider joy on two conceptual fronts. First, I want to think of joy as a work of resistance against domination. Joy does not float, but is entangled within processes of social, political, and economic struggle. Secondly, I want think of joy spatially, both in the context of geography as places that brings joy to life, and as a psychic space that we may inhabit that would enable us to handle the contradictions of life and make pain productive. On both these fronts, I understand joy to be deeply embedded in particular spaces and social forms that teach us joy, constituting its subjective characteristics and organizing the gestures of enjoyment. Rather than focusing on the quiddity of joy, seeking to discern its qualitative distinctions, e.g. joy as opposed to happiness, as opposed to fun, as over against euphoria, I will focus on joy at the site of relationality and reciprocity. The body of Jesus in this regard illumines the complexities and entanglements of joy and stages new possibilities for joy.

I come to this question regarding the centrality of joy to Christianity from the perspective of African American Christian life and more broadly African Diaspora Christian life and the jagged realities of joy that mark that life. Those realities do not make this a form of Christianity totally different from other forms, but one that allows us to consider the creaturely and Christological dimensions of joy. Joy for African Diaspora Christians and many others exists under the conditions of oppression, opposition, and domination and I am interested in how joy is performed under these actual conditions. How do oppressed peoples access joy? What does joy entail within realities of
domination, cultural imperialism, and racial animus? Joy exists in this regard in fragmentation, division, and segregation.

Segregated joy means that there are different, often competing patterns of rejoicing and practices of enjoyment that mirror social divisions. Segregated joy follows what James C. Scott calls the arts of resistance for oppressed peoples and functions within the hidden transcripts of speech that is offstage or behind the scenes in sequestered or safe spaces spoken by the dominated. These hidden transcripts, according to Scott, stand in relation to the official (or public) transcripts of what people say as truth when they are in the presence of those who have power over them as well as what people in power say to those subject to them. Both those in power and those outside of power engage in this dual reality of speech and the question this raises for me is how does this speech enlist joy given the entanglement of joy in such a dynamic?

This is a dynamic deeply embedded in African Diaspora Christian life where joy emerged as a work of resistance against oppression. This was joy under the particular kind of constraint that came through colonial relations and racial modernity and whose trajectories remain strong. That work of joy is multifaceted and follows a Christological pattern of rejoicing in hope (Romans 12: 12), rejoicing not in wrongdoing but in truth (1 Cor. 13:6), and repeated rejoicing (Phil. 4:4). This is, however, an oppositional joy which is constituted, contra mundi, in resistance to the racial order of the world. Such rejoicing moves in and with subjugated knowledge(s) that build on both indigenous ways of knowing but also on linguistic play through which those in power are mocked. This oppositional joy serves the important task of humanizing dehumanizing conditions, and narrativizing the actions of a hostile racial world into an ongoing series of stories that push back against the power of structural oppression. The command to rejoice in this way is fundamental to African Diaspora Christian strategies for survival, but equally important the command to rejoice is inside a wider reality of joy work of the creature.

The joy work of the creature is the work of creating and finding joy. That work cannot be reduced for African Diaspora Christians to this important
work of resistance, but nor should it be contrasted too starkly from it so as to obscure their interrelationship. To find joy requires we resist those realities that create despair. To resist despair requires we find and create joy from the world around us. Joy in this way entails spatiality. What constitutes a space of joy and where are those spaces? This is a crucial question that is rarely considered theologically. At one level, the space of joy is sequestered space, often segregated space where the pleasure of unguarded speech is often coupled with aesthetic pleasure. This space could be what I call cultural nationalist space which is space of a people, by a people, and for a particular people that conducts the performances and rituals of enjoyment. Geography matters in joy work as specific places yields the possibilities of continuity of identity. There in specific places a people can repeat their joy and know themselves in the repetition. For many African Diaspora Christians that place would be the church, but it could also be club, a bar, a gym, a barber or beauty shop, someone’s home, or a street corner.

At another level, the space of joy could also be a psychic space of emotional and spiritual habitation. This psychic space should not be strongly contrasted with geographic place. They dance together not only in memory and dream, but also fantasy and hope. One powerful example would be sonic space, the space constituted by music. Music and joy have a long history together among black Diaspora peoples which has been construed in a variety of ways from demonization to romanticization, but rarely in its theological dimension as a profound marker of creaturely existence. This sonic space becomes a womb for joy where it will live and breathe, and take flight through sound, weaving together bodies and places in joined habitation, the joy of the body and the joy of a place becoming one. Learning how to access this space of joy became a spiritual discipline shared by Christian and nonChristian alike, however Afro-Christianity has historically been a central facilitator of this spiritual discipline as displaced African peoples taught themselves and their children how and what it meant to inhabit the sonic space of joy.

This joy work is certainly communal work, because this psychic space is a shared space. Yet the communal dimensions of this work are calibrated to the crucial efforts of teaching black peoples to handle contradiction and if possible to make pain productive. Such work must never be read
triumphalistically as though such work implies mastery and an always efficient transformation of despair, anger, frustration into something useful. It does not. This joy work always exist near to the edge of nihilism, death, and nothingness, pressing against the absurdities of a racial world, hoping to use its energies against it to launch bodies back into life sustaining and life enhancing ways of living. Joy here works at the edge of death, resisting death’s desire to take more and more of life. One powerful site of joy within sonic space is the blues. The blues exist in a Trinitarian fashion as a mode of musicality, a particular musical structure or idiom, and a way of life. The blues at essence is a method of working contradiction and dissonance into a statement of pained life being yet lived well. The importance of the blues as a grand architectonic of modernism and modern music has been well documented, but we are yet to reckon with the fundamental role of the blues in facilitating modern self-reflexivity and self-knowing in the work of self-making. For our purposes, the blues are important because they show us a joy constituted and sustained in the face of suffering which also becomes a psychic space that facilitates the creation of a geographic space where the music may be played, heard, and lived. The blues as sonic space also parallel a dynamic presented by the body of Jesus in which his suffering is surprisingly and stunningly linked to his joy – his joy sustains him through his criminalization, torture, and murder and his joy ultimately situates him in a place that becomes a space for us, a space of life. Seated at the right hand of the throne of God, the Son makes his joy present in our space and time which he has made his own space and time (Heb 12:2).

These two ways of thinking joy as a work of resistance and thinking joy spatially also allows us to grasp the contradiction of segregated joy. Given joy’s entanglements in racial animus and struggles in and against social hegemonies, is there a possibility of joy that overcomes social fragmentation? Is there the possibility of a joy that joins – joins peoples who would never imagine their joy together but usually in isolation or either against one another or in exploitation or subversion of each other? This it seems to me is the crucial question about Christianity and joy and even the joy of other religions. If the joy of religions sustains its adherents even in the face of the brutalities of social life and over against violence in all its forms, has that joy
exhausted itself in that very work? I think not, because if joy is a reality of the creature, then what we are facing with the joy of religions might be an opportunity of linking joy in ways only limited by our imaginations. Could Christian joy, for example, help us re-imagine of the social? A Christian joy that might move in such a direction would need to press more clearly into the connecting, even reconstituting realities of Jesus’ joy as intimated in the Hebrews passage noted above.

Jesus presents a joy that gathers. His joy gathers its strength from the cloud of witnesses to God’s faithfulness. Yet even further his joy draws life from the life of God. The joy of life with God that marked the life of his people also marks his life and fuels his focus in the midst of hostility to his message. The gospel narratives do not present a joy with Jesus that is obvious. Instead it seems to be joy that is revealed in the intimate spaces of need and desire, where the longings of those who want to be healed and delivered from oppression meet the longing of Jesus for the full realization of the reign of God. The disciples are given access to the hidden transcripts of Jesus’ joy (John 15:8-13).

8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.
9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.
10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.
11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.
12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

These disciples participate in Jesus’ joy, being drawn into his life for the sake of others. It is precisely the sharing in his joy that creates the bridge between Jew and Gentile, and opens the possibilities of transgressive border-crossing pleasures in life together (See Romans 15:7-11). Could it be that this envisioned border-crossing joy is what sustained Jesus through his suffering, one in which the power of a shared joy would take on global even cosmic dimensions? Here with this vision the hostility of sinners along with the structural realities of sin are overcome in life with the triune God. The writer of Hebrews suggests that Jesus invites us to share in this visionary joy.
The possibility of a joy that gathers is already implicit in African Diaspora Christianity (as it is in many other forms of Christian faith). Segregated joy was thrust upon the African Christian and took on its pedagogical dimensions through the centuries of inflicted terrorism, and white supremacy, teaching these and other Christians that real joy cannot be found at the site of interracial existence. There were, however, those who pressed against this pedagogy, opting for spaces of shared desire and hope that would yield the stolen pleasure of a joy that suggested a different way, a different life. Sonic space was often host to such outbreaks of illicit joy as people shared in music and dance turning themselves even if only for a moment into conduits of exchange that would unleash a power to create the cultural baroque and open new avenues of thought and dream for a better life together. The potential of a joy that gathers from within Afro-Christianity resides in its long history of a radical egalitarianism in the Spirit that acknowledged the ability of God to take hold of any life, no matter how resistant. The historian Albert Raboteau suggested that sometimes even slave and slave master shared a common conversion and a common ecstasy. The issue, however, has always been how might a shared conversion even a shared ecstasy be sustained? How might a shared joy become constitutive of a shared life?

A joy that moves through boundaries and overcomes social fragmentation requires the desire to locate joy in new spaces that becomes more than a search for new commodities to consume. Admittedly, the material conditions for joy are permeated by the energies of consumption and commodity formation such that trying to imagine a purified search for joy’s new spaces is unrealistic and unnecessary. Again, we must follow the trajectory of Jesus’ life which gathers together those whose reasons varied for being in his presence, yet they found themselves together encircled by his obedience to the Spirit that issued in a command to love one another. A joy that gathers ends in a command to love. The search may appear aimless or selfish or for all the wrong reasons but like those disciples who were unclear on what it meant to come along with Jesus, so too those who search may be caught up in a life that expands their vision and a desire that overwhelms and sanctifies their own desires. Joy may be found in the spaces where we would
not have looked and with those we would not imagine could reframe our lives with a surprising God.

This kind of joy is at odds with the reigning realities of segregated joy, and it requires a new kind of resistance that should also be our work. We should resist modes of life that align joy with the structuring energies of class, gender, and racial division. Rejoicing in the Lord should be a fugitive act that breaks open not only our despair, but the despair of others by breaking down the walls that exist even in our joy.