

The Gospel according to Disney: Hi! I'm Joy!

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Rev. Kerry Greenhill, First UMC, Hampton, VA

This sermon was originally written by Rev. Kerry Greenhill in 2016 for the Faith & Film series at Lakewood United Methodist Church in Lakewood, Colorado. Pastor Kerry has generously shared her sermon with us for online worship this week, as Pastor Melissa is on vacation.

Matthew 5:3-12

Today we continue our “Gospel according to Disney” sermon series with Pixar’s 2015 hit, *Inside Out*, about 11-year-old Riley and her family. This movie also touches on the themes of the greatest commandment, of loving with all of one’s heart, and loving neighbor as oneself. But this time, the focus is on what’s taking place inside the main character’s mind.

Starting with Riley’s birth, we see that her personality is dominated by Joy, a glowing pixie-like figure with blue hair. Other emotions, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, appear soon after, each with a different shape and color. And as Joy narrates, she describes the function of each one. Fear keeps Riley safe; Disgust keeps Riley from being poisoned (physically or socially); Anger cares deeply about things being fair; and Sadness – well, Joy isn't too sure what *she* does.

These five emotions take turns at the control board of Riley’s mind, and influence both her decisions and her memories, depicted as little glass marbles that roll into headquarters each day and are then sent off to long-term storage at night. Certain core memories form her “Islands of Personality”: Family, Friendship, Hockey, Honesty, and Goofball Islands are what makes Riley *Riley*.

At the age of 11, Riley moves with her parents from Minnesota to San Francisco. In the process, Riley leaves behind her home, her friends, her hockey team, the woods and pond of her childhood – all that she has known. When they arrive in California, the new house is in disrepair, the moving van is lost and delayed by several days, and Dad is consumed with work-related phone calls. Joy is starting to lose control of Riley’s attitude, when Mom comes into Riley’s room at bedtime and thanks her for being “our happy little girl,” as it makes things so much easier on her parents. “Dad is under so much strain with this new venture,” says Mom, “but if you and I can keep smiling, that would really help.”

Well, decide the emotions in headquarters, Team Happy it is. Joy will stay in charge. The next day, Joy draws a circle on the floor and tells Sadness that her new job is to keep all the sadness contained to that little circle, not touching any memories or the console that represents Riley’s decision-making, speech, and actions.

We can't blame Riley, can we? She's 11, generally a happy kid, and she wants to please her parents, be a good girl, and have a good life. But I wonder - how many of us have done the same, decided to suppress unpleasant emotions, whether sadness, or anger, or fear? Maybe it's for the sake of our relationships, maybe it's just because those feelings are so uncomfortable and we don't really know how to handle them. The trouble is, when we try to push away or box up one emotion, there are unintended consequences. And when Riley tries to bottle up her Sadness, she loses her ability to feel Joy as well.

As Joy tries to manage Riley's first day at school, she can't keep Sadness from touching a core memory and turning it from joyful gold to melancholy blue. A new core memory is made as Riley breaks down in tears in her classroom, and Joy is horrified to see that this sad moment is about to become a permanent part of Riley's personality. In the scramble that follows, the core memories are scattered, shutting down the Islands of Personality, and Joy and Sadness both get sucked into a tube that carries them out to long-term storage. Then begins their long and challenging journey back to the center of Riley's mind. Meanwhile, she cannot access either Sadness or Joy, and things kind of start to fall apart.

Now, Joy has identified the ways that Fear, Anger, and Disgust help Riley survive and live well. But she doesn't understand Sadness. Joy sees Sadness as an inconvenience, a source of frustration, and generally a "Debbie Downer," who spoils the fun and good times that Riley is supposed to enjoy all the time. Honestly, Joy can be a bit of a tyrant. And although the feeling of joy may have self-evident value – who doesn't want to feel happy, after all? – we begin to wonder if she'll ever appreciate that other feelings are actually worthwhile for more than a moment's survival and protection.

Here's the thing. I think that sometimes in the church, we uphold the tyranny of Joy. In the Bible and Christian tradition, Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, it is the reward for enduring suffering. Some Christian communities focus on feeling happy in Jesus *all the time* without fully acknowledging the messy and complicated realities of life in a broken and hurting world. We're not supposed to feel sad, or angry, or scared, or disgusted. Those are labeled as *bad feelings*, problems we are supposed to fix, and we are advised to pray them away, let God replace them with *good feelings*. And maybe sometimes that works. For a little while.

But the Bible also contains plenty of support for a different approach to our emotions. **Ecclesiastes 3** describes how "For everything there is a season – a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Jesus himself felt all the feels, as the kids say:

Jesus felt joy: Luke 10:21: At that same hour Jesus **rejoiced** in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants..."

Jesus felt fear in Gethsemane as he faced his betrayal and death: **Luke 22:44:** In his **anguish** he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

Jesus felt sadness on the death of his good friend Lazarus: **John 11:35:** Jesus began to **weep**.

Jesus got fed up and disgusted with people: **Mark 8:11-12:** The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And **he sighed deeply in his spirit** and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them...

And when his enemies were watching for an opportunity to accuse him of breaking the Sabbath, Jesus got **mad**: **Mark 3:5:** He looked around at them with **anger**; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

Jesus also taught his followers that a whole range of emotions and unpopular social positions could be blessed, as we heard in the reading of the Beatitudes in **Matthew 5:**

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*"Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled."*

Or, in other words, God loves those who are sad and despairing. God loves those who are fearful and humble. God loves those who care deeply about things being fair.

Because it turns out that all emotions, even Sadness, have value, and are worthy of understanding.

Joy begins to realize the value of Sadness when she sees how effective empathy is. And, in fact, when we get a glimpse into the minds of Riley's parents earlier in the movie, we see that her mom's headquarters is dominated not by Joy, but by Sadness. Her mom is not a gloomy or miserable person, but someone whose sadness is mature and integrated, an expression of empathy, compassion, connection, and caring relationships.

You see, I think that at some level, Joy thinks that people love Riley because she's happy. But real love isn't conditional like that. Sadness in a loved one can deepen love, can provide new opportunities to express love, as well as becoming the basis for a deeper understanding of and compassion for other people's pain and grief.

The point of all this is not that we should necessarily allow every emotion that rises up within us to have full sway over our words, actions, our attitudes or relationships. Fear has worth, but if it reigns in us, it can keep us from acting on our values, pursuing our goals, standing up for ourselves or others. It can also lead us to believe the world is basically a scary and dangerous place, making us unwilling to try new things, build relationships, understand, or value others.

Anger has value, especially if it drives us to speak out and act for justice, but if it is allowed to cool and harden, it can become resentment, bitterness, a chip on the shoulder. Anger is also a secondary emotion, springing up from either fear or sadness, and as a defense mechanism it can prevent us from seeing and dealing with the real root issue.

Disgust has value, but it can too easily become cynicism, a belief that nothing is worth our energy. It can also be used to hurt others: Name-calling, bullying, peer pressure, and their political manifestations in misogyny, racism, classism, and other social attitudes that dehumanize whole groups of people through obvious or subtle language and behavior.

The goal, then, is not emotional anarchy, but whole-hearted living, which requires understanding, acceptance, and integration of all our feelings. Loving God with your whole heart and loving your neighbor as yourself doesn't necessarily mean feeling warm and fuzzy, happy and peaceful, all the time.

To me, it means allowing the love of God into every corner of your heart, accepting the whole of who you are in light of that love, and offering every feeling and experience – whether we consider them “good” or “bad,” positive or negative – up to God for transformation and redemption.

This, to me, is living and loving whole-heartedly. When our emotions are understood and accepted for the value they offer, are allowed to have their place in our lives without being used against others, and are held in the light of God's loving acceptance, we can be authentic, vulnerable, and whole, living life to the fullest, as Jesus proclaimed.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.