“Whenever one is preoccupied with happiness, the possibility of joy is pre-empted. . . . Joy is the reaction has to the full appreciation of Being.” That’s Being with a capital “B,” encompassing our individual being, the wider experience of being alive in the world, and the source of all being, God. Those two sentences are from one of my favorite books—really, probably in my top 20—*Will and Spirit* by the late Gerald May. In the book May deals with questions of will and willingness of control and surrender, from the perspective of a theologian and psychiatrist whose work at the Shalem Institute focused much more on the spiritual than the psychological. The interplay of the two disciplines was a major emphasis in his work, primarily along the lines of spirituality guiding the conversation instead of the other way around.

The book more or less reintroduced itself to me a couple of days ago when I couldn’t find the true crime book I’d been reading. Looking for something more uplifting, my eyes lit on the book case beside my computer, and the familiar title called out to me.

The immediate point of contact with what we’re doing this morning—this celebration of the sacrament—is the very last sentence in the prayer for those who have just been baptized: “Grant them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. That line in some form or another has stayed with me for years. I think it’s one of the most important statements in all of the prayer book, in all of our devotional literature—a wish and hope, as well as a prayer, for those who have entered into this family, the Church.

This time around, I noticed that “will” and “spirit” both appear here as well, as a kind of affirmation of having rediscovered May’s book with that title.

And that in turn led me back to this troubling reading from Luke’s gospel on the last Sunday of the Church year (because next Sunday we begin again with the First Sunday of Advent). Well, troubling at least for a preacher who is about to welcome three new Christians into the fold.

The scene is this: Jesus is proclaimed King as he hangs on the cross between two criminals. The proclamation is not by royal edict, nor by popular acclamation, but by one of those criminals crucified next to him. He says, simply, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Some of the mob—even the other criminal—had mocked him by calling him “King of the Jews” and “Messiah” in voices dripping with sarcasm.

But the proclaiming criminal could see, even in the midst of the most extreme suffering, Jesus’ noble and divine nature.

Jesus’ response underscores God’s loving presence in all circumstances of life, even the most demeaning and agonizing: “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Whatever else that might mean, regardless of a myriad of varying interpretations, I take it to mean, “My kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, is here. Today. Now.”

And in light of these baptisms this morning and the whole sweep of Jesus’ life and ministry, I see that as a promise of God’s promise in every circumstance, in our darkest hours as well as in those moments of celebration when we thank God for gifts of happiness and joy, as we do today.

Every bit of Jesus’ human life was necessary to bring him to the victory of life over death. His own vilification, the healings he performed, the companionship with the twelve and his many followers, his passion and death.

Aiming at happiness alone precludes our experience of joy. We must be open to all of life—darkness and pain as well as joy and wonder. And we are assured by Jesus’ promise, that God is with us through every bit of it, even when we most doubt it.

As we baptize Jaxon, Samantha, and Aleksander this morning, may we hear in that prayer an invitation and promise not only for them, but for all of us:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

+ + +