

My office and my living space always seem to be cluttered. There are file folders on my desk. Unread books piled up on my nightstand. Clothes in my closet that I should give away, but I keep those clothes because I'm convinced I'll fit in them again someday. Stuff seems to accumulate in my life. I don't ever seem to pare down that stuff which only seems to grow and grow.

Some years back, in yet another attempt to de-clutter, I bought and read Marie Kondo's book, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up.

Kondo recommends that the reader take several steps to help get better organized and / or to purge one's belongings. Her mantra for doing so goes something like this, "if an item sparks joy in you, then keep it. If it doesn't spark joy, then give it away or throw it away."

Now, I have lots of stuff. But I can honestly say, there isn't much that I have which sparks joy. If I were to adopt Kondo's philosophy, it would mean throwing out, recycling, or giving away most of what I possess. I don't see joy leaping from my clothes closet, off my nightstand, or coming from my dresser drawers.

If you've ever watched the show Hoarders, you know that each episode depicts individuals grappling with the following things. First, many hoarders do what they do because they think all those items will bring fulfillment. Or, second, they keep the

items they have because of the sentimental value, real or imagined, they have for the owner. For me, for many, these two principles control us as well. We think, “if I have more stuff or the right stuff, then I’ll be happy. Or if I hold on to these items that have sentimental value, then I will be fulfilled.”

On this Sunday we call Gaudete (which means “let us rejoice!”) the question to ask is, “what sparks joy in me?” Spoiler alert, IT’S NOT MATERIAL THINGS!

In today’s gospel, John is in prison. He has nothing. He probably knows that he will be executed. Despite what is lacking in his life, John holds on to hope. That hope brings joy and is rooted in the prophecy that the long-awaited-for Messiah is near at hand. John has heard rumors that Jesus might be the Messiah everyone is expecting and hoping for, but he’s not really sure. And so he has his disciples ask Jesus, “are you the Messiah, the one promised by God?”

Jesus answers this way, “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.” Jesus means these things in a literal sense. But his answer also implies something more. Jesus implies that as people believe in him, they will experience joy and transformation, and not necessarily physical healing alone. Joy and transformation are signs that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. Over and over I say that the Kingdom of God isn’t “up there” or something we experience after we die. The Kingdom of God is here. Again, Jesus affirms that the Kingdom is present when we experience his joy and his transformation.

John wasn't sure about Jesus. Perhaps John asked the question he did because Jesus did not conform to the image of a Messiah which he had in mind. But hearing that Jesus' ministry was leading folks to experience transformation and joy, John's spirit was elated. Even in prison, John could experience joy because the grace of Christ the Messiah could not be prohibited from entering a locked jailcell. Rather, the peace and joy of Christ, and the hope that Christ brings, passes through locked doors and penetrates our hearts, even if they are closely guarded or tightly closed.

Like you, I know many people who have left the Church despite believing and despite their efforts to pray in faith. However earnest their prayer though, things didn't turn out as they had hoped. I'm sure John the Baptist prayed to be released from prison. But that didn't happen. Nevertheless, he encountered Christ in the desolation of a jailcell. The lesson here is that God is often found in the unexpected. God also reveals himself in our difficulties, often in the most profound ways. Christian joy is found in chance encounters, quiet conversations, even experiences that initially seem like failures.

On Friday, I had an annual checkup with my ear, nose, and throat doctor. He did surgery on me back in 1988. I have been his patient since then and have an appointment with him at least once a year. All through those years, he has treated me and brought me healing. During those appointments, we talk about our common faith. I always feel sorry for the patients who have appointments after mine, because this doctor and I spend a bit of time talking theology. His father was a Pentecostal minister and

he knows the Bible better than I ever could. Those moments spark joy in me. They are moments of physical healing and spiritual sustenance.

I always thank my doctor for the healing he brought to my diseased inner ear which afflicted me for many years. He consistently demurs and says it is God who heals. Now this is one of the pioneer surgeons who developed cochlear implants in the United States many decades ago. He is perhaps one of the smartest human beings I've ever met. He is also among the humblest. When I left his office that day, I noticed a picture hanging in one of the rooms at his office. It was a picture of surgeons and assistants fiercely concentrating on a person they were operating on. You could see the intensity, or was it worry, on their faces. But surrounding the doctors and embracing them is Christ – who is serene, confident, and compassionate. It is a joy to see and experience something like that in the office of such a talented and successful physician. At the end of this last appointment, with tears in his eyes, he said he was sorry he couldn't bring back full hearing to my affected ear. He seemed genuinely remorseful. In contrast, I told him how elated I was to be free from infections in that ear and free from the excruciating pain that once afflicted me. For a number of years he strongly suggested that I get hearing aids. For a while, my pride prevented me from getting them. I thought, "what will people think of me? Will having hearing aids signal to others that I'm getting older and that my body is deteriorating" – which, not surprisingly, is exactly what's happening to me. And on and on I went with those thoughts. Eventually, I relented and got those hearing aids. On the drive home from that appointment last Friday, two things dawned on me. First, the doctor DID restore

my hearing with his persistent and gentle suggestions. Second, that casual encounter sparked something in me. It brought joy to me and reminded me that Christ was present in something as nondescript as an appointment with a physician.

Material things don't spark joy. Only Christ does. Christ who wants to be and often is at the center of our encounters and experiences.

Unexpected encounters and conversations like this spark joy because that's where Christ is. Our family gatherings at Christmas, large or small and as dysfunctional as they might be at times, spark joy because that's where Christ is. The laughter – like laughing at ourselves because of our unrealistic expectations - sparks joy because Christ is there, right in the middle of our flawed humanity.

Target, Walmart, Mercedes Benz, and so many others never mention the word Christ in their ads this time of year. That omission is purposeful. Retailers tell us over and over again that joy will come from material things. But, as John the Baptist discovered in today's gospel, TRUE contentment and joy (even when imprisoned) come only from knowing the Christ.

Material things don't spark joy. Only Christ does. Perfect health, while a blessing, doesn't spark joy. The perfect gift (if there is such a thing) may be a treasure, but it doesn't spark everlasting joy. The perfect Christmas dinner with the perfect Christmas family is never possible – as the constant airing of movies this time of year like It's a Wonderful Life and Christmas Vacation reflect. It is only with Christ that we discover joy and experience

true peace when surrounded by the mess that usually descends on us this time of year.

If you don't feel joy yet, if you're anxious, if you are overwhelmed, then just keep turning to Christ. He is present to you in your doubt or struggle. He is the one who will heal your heart, bring you peace, and spark joy in you. He is present in our conversations with our doctors, at the grocery stores, after Mass as we walk to our cars, when we give gifts to migrant children, when we go to confession, when we give and forgive without expecting anything in return, when we pay attention to that annoying family member, and as we stray into the minefield that is a political discussion around the dinner table sometime this season. It is in events like these that Christ reveals himself.

Rather than looking under our tree to find joy, let us look all around us. Let us also lovingly and with childlike hope peer into the smelly, messy, frightening, and less-than-worthy manger. For that is where Christ chose to be born. That's where his joy in abundance is found – ready for the taking and ready for sharing with all those around us.

Amen? Amen!