

“WHAT MAKES YOUR HEART SING?”

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In planning my 2009 sabbatical to Venezuela’s Isla de Margarita, I wrote a grant to the Lilly Foundation. They fund such things for weary pastors, believe it or not. Gathering my thoughts to apply, I imagined many serious, important things to do with my time. Then I called a pastor-friend formerly funded by Lilly for his advice. And I shared with him my plans for a world-beating sabbatical to South America.

What do you think? I asked him. If you write that, they’ll never fund you, he said. Remember, a sabbatical is to step out of the pastoral routine for different work in measured amounts and to get rest you need to do what you do year in, year out. So slow down, cut yourself some slack, and redo your proposal with a little grace.

I got my Lilly application. Sure enough, their question front and center was: *what makes your heart sing?* When your life is creased with duty and responsibility, it’s not easy to put aside obligation. But that question inspired me to dream of restorative ways to renew my ministry. Guess what? Lilly funded me to the tune of a lovely, breezy villa with a backyard pool and waterfall, and a two-story library with volumes in 12 languages. They flew four pastor-authors like me into the island where our many ideas grew into books later written. You already know the book.

Guess what? We don’t have to always wear a hair-shirt. God wants good things for us. I say that after last Sunday’s tough call to discipleship: whoever doesn’t love me more than any other love, Jesus challenged us, can’t be my disciple.

We begin a new church year. And beyond everything else we must normally do this time of year—receiving new members, regathering our Church School and Choir, convening boards and committees--we must also fix our Meetinghouse.

But what if instead of coming at this from grim duty and gray obligation, bracing ourselves against an immovable rock after our summer of restful play; what if we asked ourselves: what makes our heart sing? *What makes God’s heart sing?*

It is not a misplaced question, even for serious-minded people of faith. After all, you heard Jesus in John’s gospel. I came to rejoice your hearts with a rare joy no one can ever take from you. A joy where you’ll ask and I give you what you need. Feel free to ask God, Jesus said to them. And you’ll receive, completing your joy.

Someone said in preaching a sermon, we preachers preach to ourselves and let others listen. I confess, I get far too serious about my charge as a pastor. As my friend and co-writer in our Lilly-fueled book, Ana Copeland, constantly asks in everything I do, where is the joy? Jesus claims joy is our intended destination. What stops us from receiving it? Our unwillingness to trust that Jesus’ way eventually wins despite all of the countervailing evidence with our broken days? Our

lack of faith eagerness to step in that breach, become the hero to save the world, accumulate all that glory for ourselves with grand designs that'll only turn to dust?

What makes your heart sing, Katherine Hedlund, Willy and Nick? What makes your heart sing, Gary Morello? What makes your heart sing Dan, Max and choir? What makes your heart sing, lifelong members and you joining today? Now in song and from here forward, I invite you to return to this joyful challenge with me. Somehow I suspect I am not the only duty-bound, all-too-serious soul who needs permission to claim and live a destiny of joy. But grace is always mediated to us.

Tightly controlling things with contingency planning, we think ourselves wise for always asking what if the worst happens. As we obsess over the worst things, the fog of dark clouds will envelope us. For we leave no room for God to do the best things, things that are our heart's desire, and things God wants us to have. Can we pause to reflect on that so we don't actually make life's burdens greater?

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a memoir of his early days serving his church in Detroit, *Leaves from a Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. His summary reflection on church is the superabundance of good will that is here and the scarcity of imagination we produce. By forcing me to answer the question, what makes your heart sing, Lilly forced the imaginative question upon me, and pointed me towards a genuine joy. I always welcome how everyone present *wants* the best things to unfold here. But I want even more to unfetter or unleash our *imagination* to free us to live fully.

This is where we need to go, where we hunger to go, where our faith points us. Beginning this year--with all of its new initiatives--from a perspective of blessing. Giftedness. Opportunity. Not just how far we've come by faith in five years. But how many chances to love God and transform life for good are waiting before us.

That is where we want to begin this year and point ourselves toward our destiny, trusting God, expecting joy, grateful for each other, radiating Jesus' good news. Amen.