

# The Joy of the “Great Dance”

## Receiving and Giving God’s Gifts

BY ALEXIA SALVATIERRA



*Reach for the Stars, Delphimages Photo Creations*

I tell you all this that my joy may be yours, and your joy may be complete” (Jn. 15:11, Inclusive Bible).<sup>1</sup> Jesus says this to his disciples after assuring them that they will be loved if they follow his commandments. How comforting this must have been for the disciples as they struggled with the revelation that Jesus would be leaving them. And how comforting, beautiful and exciting it is us for us, who also bask in Jesus’ love. The commandments aren’t just rules set out to be followed; they are a path to joy.

Who doesn’t long for the fullness of joy? We all experience moments in our lives when we taste joy. Are there things we can do to bring more joy into our lives? While we’re talking about it, what is joy exactly?

### Experiencing Joy

I was raised in a working-class area of Los Angeles in a context of ongoing chaos, conflict and danger. When I was four years old, my grandmother took me to see a ballet. I was transported by the beauty and relentlessly asked my mother when I could begin ballet classes—an unlikely fantasy in our world. However, my mother was so committed to delighting the hearts of her children that she found a job driving a van for a small ballet school so that I could take daily classes.

I remember arriving at the door every day and being filled with joy. Just the anticipation of the music beginning and the dance lifting me up brought joy. Even the hard, sometimes painful work of learning ballet was infused with

the joy of dance. The injustice and anguish in my community faded into the background when I smelled the rosin and my feet hit the hardwood floor.

That is my earliest memory of joy, but joy isn’t just for children. As an adult, I still love to dance!

### Happiness, Pleasure and Joy

Before we examine how we can achieve joy (or at least embrace moments of it), let’s talk about what joy is. *Happiness* and *joy* are often used interchangeably, but happiness and joy are distinct from one another. Author and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner says, “Happiness turns up more or less where you’d expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.”<sup>2</sup>

Happiness, then, seems to be something we can work toward, achieve. Aware of what we want, we invest effort, care, time and/or money for a particular outcome—to take the vacation, earn the promotion. But there are always factors beyond our control—rain on a beach vacation, a beloved colleague who accepts a new job. Happiness, like pleasure, can be fleeting.

Joy, too, is fleeting, but it’s not something we can work toward. We experience joy or are surprised by it. Galatians 5:22 tells us joy is one of the fruits of the spirit, suggesting that, like patience, kindness and generosity, it is an attitude we can cultivate.

Pleasure and pain are opposites, just like work and play. But joy can co-exist with any of those. In fact, Frederick

Buechner also says that “vocation is where the world’s deep hunger and our own deep gladness meet.”<sup>3</sup> I think that “deep gladness” is another name for joy.

### Joy Amidst Sadness

The potential for joy is a gift, not under our control. However, God is a generous giver and we might live into that gift far more often if we could remove the blocks human beings place in the way. Sometimes we block ourselves; sometimes others throw up the barriers for us. Like other gifts from God, we can cultivate joy by being willing to see it and eager to embrace it, even in the place of sadness or suffering.

It seems that children often find or embrace joy more easily than adults. Through an immersion experience organized by Matthew 25, I visited the refugee camps in Tijuana, Mexico, in December 2018 with families who fled terrible violence in Central America. Most had walked thousands of miles before arriving at the border. They had little hope of being able to enter the United States and receive asylum. At that time, Mexico did not seem like a reasonable option either.

The parents’ faces showed weariness, stress and despair. While the children’s eyes also showed fear, when we created artwork together, they entered easily into joy—laughing or rapt in the experience of painting.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us have left behind this child-like ability to find or embrace joy. So how can we get to the joyous life Jesus intended for us?

### The Great Dance

While the barriers to joy are many and various, one common thread is disconnection from the “great dance.” The “great dance” is (not surprisingly, given my early love of ballet) one of

my favorite metaphors for thinking about our relationship with God and with one another.

In *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper explores these relationships through a close reading of Genesis. She notes that the first two chapters of Genesis paint a picture of shared dominion. God has dominion over all of creation. God exercises that dominion as creative authority, actively encouraging and enabling all life to flourish. The man and the woman are created in the image of God, so are also endowed with creativity and caregiving.

God retains ultimate dominion, but at the same time, generously shares dominion with human beings—power flowing back and forth as humans joyfully surrender their power to God and receive it back again. Human beings likewise share dominion with one another; there is no difference in their roles or responsibilities. This is all a dance as joyous as any experience of dancing that I knew as a child.

Then the serpent convinces the man and woman that they should be suspicious of God. They no longer trust God to give power freely. Instead, they believe that they must grab power for themselves. The end result is loss—loss of the fluid exchange of dominion with God and then each other. The man becomes the woman’s “baal” (false God). Creating new life and sustaining life become hard and painful. The great dance goes on, but human beings now participate in ways that are often profoundly out of harmony with God and with each other.

### Parts of a Whole

The early church called Jesus Christ the Lord of the dance and, in their worship, they incorporated circle dances (a symbolic expression of

equality).<sup>4</sup> In Christ, the process of redemption and restoration begins. Jesus called for an end to the hierarchies that impede the flow of the dance. “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In Christ, we are invited and empowered to fully join in the great dance of creative love and to work for the flourishing of all.

We are one body; if any part suffers, we all suffer. If any part rejoices, we all rejoice. If we are disconnected from the dance—whether because we are excluded or because we separate ourselves—we all suffer, and our joy is diminished.

Returning to John 15:11, Jesus tells the disciples that if they keep his commandments, they will abide in his love. To make things extra clear, Jesus then says, “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). Knowing this is our call as Christians, how do people in our churches and communities end up excluded from the dance?

### Giving and Receiving Gifts

For many years, I managed ministries with people who were homeless. One Christmas, one of our regulars came into our Christmas Eve celebration weeping so hard that she was gasping. When we asked her what had upset her so deeply, she shared with us that she had spent the day trying to avoid a cold rain by sitting under the awning outside a department store. She said that she had watched people all day coming out with Christmas gifts for their friends and families. She had felt a little sad thinking about no one giving her a gift, but that a more overwhelming sorrow came when she realized that no one wanted anything that she had to offer.

To participate in the great dance is to be part of the circle of giving and



receiving. Each of us is a child of God, bestowed with gifts that can help the world and others in it. Yet, for a variety of reasons—socioeconomic status, race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation—most of us will, at one time, find ourselves excluded from the circle of authentic giving and receiving.

Called to love one another, we must look for ways to love each other as individuals and dismantle the systems that suggest there are people who have nothing to offer.

Greg Boyle, a Catholic priest who founded an intervention and rehabilitation program for gang members called Home Boys, talks about disabling shame. The majority of his “homies” heard very young that they were worthless. That message was reinforced many times, in a dark cycle of violation and punishment. The weight of their shame cuts them off from any serious attempt at joining the great dance of love and work.

At Home Boys, when they are given jobs, taught trades and welcomed into a family where the common rule is grace, many discover new life and joy for themselves and their families. They learn to dance in a circle of willing partners. The disabling

burden of their shame falls off as they all move together.

### Each Loved and Called

In the latter part of my years in homeless ministries, we began a homeless peer chaplaincy training program, designed to heal the psychological and spiritual damage caused by oppressive systems. We always began with an opening retreat at a formal retreat center where the staff and other guests did not know that our participants were homeless.

Jesse, a Mexican-American man from East Los Angeles who had been a Navy Seal in Vietnam before a drug addiction that he picked up in the war derailed his life, attended one of our retreats. He picked up a vernacular translation of the Bible and was flipping through it when he suddenly shouted, “Guys, you have to come see this!”

He was pointing to Mark 2:15–17, in which Jesus is challenged for eating with tax gatherers and prostitutes. Jesus’ response to the challenge is usually translated as “I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.” However, in this translation, his words read “I have not come to call

respectable people, but outcasts.”<sup>55</sup> Jesse said, “Get this! Jesus came to us—to us in particular—and not just to help us but to call us! To choose us to be his agents!” To join the dance fully is to be recognized as particularly called by God to serve, not just to be allowed to bring your “inferior” gifts to the common table.

### Entertaining Angels

Tomas was a teenager in rural Guatemala during part of the country’s civil war (1960–1996). Soldiers picked up Tomas and a number of other boys on their way home from working in the tobacco fields and forced them to enter the army. Army leaders realized Tomas was a natural leader and forced him and a few other boys into special services (dubbed “S-2,” but also informally known as the death squads). None of the boys wanted to join S-2. Two ran away that night and were subsequently caught and tortured in front of the other boys, with the threat that the same treatment would happen to their families if they tried to run away.

Tomas ended up serving in S-2 for several years before he was able to escape and to hide his widowed





## Joy Journal

In the article, Alexia Salvatierra writes, “Joy, too, is fleeting, but it’s not something we can work towards. We experience joy or are surprised by it. Galatians 5:22 tells us joy is one of the fruits of the spirit, suggesting that like patience, kindness and generosity, it is an attitude we can cultivate.”

1. When was a time you were truly surprised by joy?
2. Do you think that joy can be cultivated and if so, what would that look like for you?

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3. Think of someone in your PW group or circle. What gifts does she bring to the community? Would you be willing to tell her?
4. Loneliness and isolation—being disconnected from the dance—are not what God intends. In what ways do you or your PW group extend welcome and community?

mother and siblings in a barrio outside Guatemala City, the country’s capital. When he heard that soldiers were searching for him, he fled to the United States, hoping for freedom and safety. When he arrived in the United States, he bent down and kissed the ground, pledging that if he could obtain asylum status that he would serve and contribute to this country in every way he could in gratitude for saving his life.

At the time, only five percent of Guatemalan refugees were granted asylum because of the U.S. alliance with the Guatemalan government. President Reagan claimed that the refugees were Communists. Tomas came from a Pentecostal family and had never been involved in politics. Yet, Tomas was seen by our government (and by many Americans) as a threat and as an invader. Tomas was ultimately able to attain legal status but the majority of those in his situation were deported.

Hebrews 13:2 calls us to provide hospitality to strangers because, by so doing, we may entertain angels in disguise. An angel in Koine Greek is not just a celestial being, but, rather, any

messenger of God sent to bring a blessing. The automatic assumption that strangers are threats instead of blessings can lead us to automatic exclusion of their gifts. What if we greeted strangers with the hospitality that welcomes them into the dance?

## Using Our Gifts

As women, we know well how easy it is to end up defined in ways that limit our contribution. Maria, a Salvadoran immigrant, was participating in a “Body of Christ” exercise in which each participant named the body part that they represented. Maria said “arm” and then burst out crying. She said that in her home country, she had been an artist but that in this country, as a housekeeper, she was only seen as an arm.

The group helped her to see that her “arm” could paint beautiful pictures for God’s mission as well as clean houses. Even if we are not working as housekeepers, there are likely times when each of us feels like merely an arm—as if the tasks we perform for our loved ones or employers are the only things people notice of us. It feels limiting to not

utilize the full range of our gifts. We can also fall into a related trap of running a rat race of attempts to prove our worth through our work without discerning our actual calling—the part that we are called to play in the great dance.

Joy is God’s gift to us all. To fully receive that gift, we must not diminish or block it by limiting ourselves or others’ participation in the great and joyous dance with God and with each other that is our birthright and purpose. 🍷

Alexia Salvatierra is coauthor of *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

## Notes

1. Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, this version is used throughout this article.
2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1973), 57–58.
3. *Ibid.*, 95.
4. Paul Dilley, *Biblical Archeology Review*, “Jesus as Lord of the Dance,” October 2, 2018; [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/post-biblical-period/jesus-as-lord-of-the-dance/](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/post-biblical-period/jesus-as-lord-of-the-dance/).
5. American Bible Society, *Good News Translation* (New York: American Bible Society, 1992).