



First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2006

Choose Joy

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The Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:11-20
Psalm 98
`Luke 24:36-53

Like so many others, I was transfixed by the large, front-page photo of Kai Leigh Harriott in the *Boston Globe* two weeks ago; the purple and yellow hair ties in her braids, and her 5-year-old face contorted, anguished. From her wheelchair in the courtroom where the person who fired the random shot that severed her spinal chord was to be sentenced, she said, “What you done to me was wrong. But I still forgive him.”

Tears, truth, and forgiveness all on the front page.

Reaction to this little girl’s tears, truth-telling, and choice to forgive was swift and varied. The next day, the *Boston Globe* reported one person advocating retribution: “I have no forgiveness for anyone who shoots a child. I say an eye for an eye. He took her life; now she can’t walk forever. Someone should take his life.” Another anticipated, perhaps projected, resentment: “When she becomes a teenager, she’s going to really see what she’s missing....”

Kai Leigh’s mother lived her family’s stance in two ways. In the courtroom, she shook the perpetrator’s hand and embraced him, whispering in his ear, “Here’s your

chance for a new beginning. Don't let God down." Later, to reporters, she interpreted, "We live in a world that seems to want people to be bitter, angry. But I don't want bitterness and anger in my life, and I don't want that for Kai Leigh."^[1]

Kai Leigh's mother is taking a stand, making a core life choice, and with her guidance, Kai Leigh is following her example. We can't know that Kai Leigh will always be in synch with this choice, but she has a solid foundation from which to make her everyday choices.

In the Luke passage just read, it says: "While in their joy they were disbelieving..." It was a decision point for the disciples. Were they going to believe? Be joyful? Or wallow in doubt? Acknowledging that the world would have her make another choice, Kai Leigh's mother joins the post-Easter disciples and their companions choosing joy.

We can relate well enough to anger, bitterness, and especially doubt. Doubt is an intellectually satisfying and politically correct stone to carry. It has a sense of sophistication. Doubt is something that prompts more study and talk, new books – all satisfying and thoroughly justifiable indulgences in Cambridge, if anywhere on earth. It's easy to doubt. We live in a stratum of society where we're *expected* to doubt.

Yet, the living presence of the risen Christ fills the disciples with joy. Joy *anyway*. In spite of all that had happened. In spite of all they still didn't understand. In spite of all that would happen. Because of all that *would* happen through Jesus' living promise.

Yes, they needed additional study and revelation. They needed to wait, at Jesus' direction, until they were ready, and then to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit. And, they needed joy, most definitely. Joy within, and through, and despite their ever-present doubt. They could not have brought Good News to the world without it. This joy made them complete.

Hard joy; difficult joy in tough circumstances. Joy *despite*.

When and how have you made a choice like this?

Here's another example: I found it in Donald Murray's "Now and Then" reflection in this Tuesday's *Globe*. I like his eloquent everyday-ness. He's been through a lot: WWII, the death of his beloved wife...

This week, he recalled a private moment in his childhood, when the kindly small town doctor sat on the corner of his bed and, after ministering to his body, ministered to

^[1] Jonathan Saltzman, "I Still Forgive Him", *Boston Globe*, April 14, 2006 and Megan Tench, "A Child's Message of Grace Amazes Her City" *Boston Globe*, April 15, 2006.

his soul by telling him, “ You don’t have to grow up to be your parents.”^{2[2]} This was liberation, the possibility of *choosing* to have choices.

I had a moment like this in college, different in every respect except impact. It was when a therapist told me I could choose my attitude. I didn’t have to live at the whim of random emotions or follow the dictates of good-girl socialization. He told me I could *own* my attitudes; *pick* my life point of view. Though I do not remember the issue that prompted me to seek counsel, I recall very clearly Ted Champ’s challenge, asking me to choose my core life stance.

I chose to be happy. Optimistic.

Like many of you, I have had moments of deep despair in my life. With my siblings, I have walked both parents through their final illnesses. I have given eulogies for two dear, dear friends. I have had more than my share of heartbreak in love (Enough already!). And I have faced depression and several other health scares in the years since I made this pivotal choice.

Think of your own list of trials and doubt-provoking life events.

Currently, I worry about money and being unemployed soon (ministry is such a lucrative call, after all). All of the trials I’ve named for myself and my many more foibles, mistakes and doubts are legitimate, authentic facets of my broken being; I deny none of them. I might frame happiness in more theological terms these days, but the essence of what I chose lo those many years ago is the same. I remain grateful to my core that Ted put *happy*; *deep* joy on the list of possibilities for my life.

Walter Brueggemann says, “...we have to (come to) know brokenness as the place where God enters to do a new thing. If brokenness is denied – avoided, reduced to the simple ‘everyone is good’; ‘everything can be fixed if I have enough money, therapy, friends, alcohol...’ (Then,) everything depends on my actions. If I’m not well or whole, it’s my fault... If brokenness is denied, there is no possibility for joy. If brokenness is denied, there is no possibility for life.”^{3[3]} Kai Leigh and her family have named the wrong and the brokenness in their own hearts – yet they seem unmotivated to judge the perpetrator of this calamity; they have consciously decided not to be victims. They have chosen to forgive.

It’s a decision to accept brokenness. None of the faults and failures I mentioned a moment ago are the definition of me. I am all of those things and more and, I am by and

^{2[2]} Donald M. Murray, “A House Call Offers Comfort in the Night”, *Boston Globe*, April 25, 2006.

^{3[3]} Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*; (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress), 1997, pages 558-562 passim.

large happy. Optimistic. It is a choice I make every day and many times each day. It is a spiritual discipline, of a sort, that has formed me deeply. It's not happy-talk. Not the sappy-happy Hallmark stuff or glib platitudes found in paperbacks. It is the act of *choice* that has been very formative for me. *Choosing* to know that I am weak, angry, doubtful, mistaken. And happy. Joyful, even. Joyful, despite...

In the list of possibilities for your life, is joy on the list?

Kai Leigh's mother said, "We are Christians. I tried very hard from the depths of my soul to hate Anthony, but it wouldn't come out."^{4[4]} As if – as if! the impact of this choice to forgive on Kai Leigh and her family were not formative enough, imagine what it might do to a society that does indeed seem to want us to be bitter, angry, and doubtful!

I have never been tested like the Harriott family. I don't know if I could make Kai Leigh's choice or that of her mother in such horrid circumstances. I hope and pray I could do so. I hope and I pray that I could do so especially because I've asked my closest relatives to do just this. My advance medical directive says that, should I ever be mortally injured or harmed by another's action in such a way that I could not speak for myself, the persons who hold responsibility for my care are to express my *emphatic* plea that no one die in state-sanctioned murder for whatever happened to me. The killing must stop.

So I say on paper, at least.

What may happen in the hearts of my relatives and friends were this to come to pass is, of course, not my choice but theirs. It will be their choice to accept forgiveness, despite brokenness; to take on the joy of Christ, whatever their doubts about my understanding of Christ's wishes. Just as it is up to you to consider the implications of Kai Leigh's choice to forgive, and the disciples' choice to be filled with joy.

You think this is hard?

The author of Deuteronomy says it is simple – it's not up in heaven or across the sea, inaccessible. "What you need is very near you, in your mouth, and in your heart...

Choose life" this ancient text commands us. This isn't a simplistic, bumper-sticker solution to the intractable decisions of life. My college counselor didn't give me a psychological prescription to ward off all subsequent melancholy and difficulties – difficult consequences of my own stupid actions and inactions – of which there have been many (and about which you will hear nothing). Nor those tragedies that might hit me randomly, as Kai Leigh Harriott was hit. It is not possible for Kai Leigh to avoid being human – it is not possible that she will be able to dodge the slings and arrows of other outrageous misfortunes – maybe some of her own doing – as she wheels her way through

^{4[4]} Megan Tench, "A Child's Message of Grace Amazes Her City" *Boston Globe*, April 15, 2006.

life. Still, she has the opportunity - everyday – to make her choice for forgiveness.
Despite everything.

Still, *despite*, I choose happiness.

Despite doubt and not knowing what was to come, the disciples choose joy.
Deuteronomy says, “Choose life so that you and your descendents may live.” So many choices! The peace of our hearts and the peace of the world depend on our choices.

Make a choice. Choose Joy.