

Choosing Joy **Mary Lenaburg**

Hi everybody. My name is Mary Lenaburg. I'm a wife, a mom, an author and a speaker, and it is my great privilege to spend some time with you today, talking about joy, and how we can choose it for ourselves, no matter what we're facing. Let's begin our time together in prayer. Shall we? Let's ask Our Lady into this time.

In the Father and the Son and the Holy spirit. Amen. Hail Mary full of grace. The Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary mother of God. Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the father and the son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So today I'm going to talk about joy. We're in a season of Advent. So, a little lent is we walk towards one of the most joyous occasions in salvation history, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Joy kind of comes from this place of gratitude. And gratitude is the attitude that will bring light from the darkness. And I'm going to use Saint Therese of Lisieux and her little way as kind of an example of how you and I can choose joy, even in the ordinary circumstances of our lives and the extraordinary trials of our lives.

So, Saint Therese translated the little way in terms of commitment to the tasks in our everyday ordinary life. She took her to her duties at the convent in Lisieux as a way of manifesting her love for God and for others. She worked as a sacristan by taking care of the altar, right? And in the chapel, she served in the refractory and in the laundry room, she scrubbed floors, with the best of them. And above all, she tried to show joy to all of the nuns, even the most difficult ones. She tried to be kind and to smile instead of be wounded by what they would say or how they would treat her. Her life sounds really routine, right? Like your life or mine, very ordinary, but it was steeped in this commitment of love that brought such profound joy her way.

It's called the little way precisely because it's simple. It's direct yet calling for an amazing fortitude and self-sacrifice. So how can you and I implement the little way? How can we choose joy in our daily lives, helping us to find that peace, no matter the circumstances in our life? Well, the first thing we have to start with is where we usually start, with prayer, right? Strengthening that relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. My mom used to say "time to pray it up, time to pray it up." So, Saint Therese used to say prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven. It is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial, as well as joy. I love that. It's a cry of gratitude in the midst of trial or joy.

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Conversation with God means entering into this intimate relationship that he desires for us. We were made in love and for love. And God's greatest desire is to be in relationship with us. And living out her faith Therese sensed that everything she was able to accomplish, came from a generous love of God in her life. Think about that. Everything you would like to accomplish in your life, how are you going to do it? We cannot do it all without God. Remember it says in scripture, "All things are possible within Him who gives me the strength." It says in the story of Our Lady's annunciation, all things are possible with God. When the angel Gabriel tells her about Elizabeth being pregnant.

Therese took this relationship very seriously. And she spent tremendous amount of time in quiet conversation with the Lord. And yet even in those quiet conversations, little things would happen where she would have to make a choice. There's one story I love of her, where she was in chapel and she was praying, and though not in front of her, seated in front of her was praying the Rosary And her beads were clacking on the seat in front of her. Just clacking. And Therese, as you know, is a very sensitive woman and it was driving her nuts. And so instead of getting upset, she offered up that little suffering for the Lord and said, I'm not going to get upset, I'm not going to tell her to stop clacking her beads. I'm just going to be here with you, Lord. I'm just going to be here with you. She made a choice to be grateful for her time with the Lord and not focus on the negative. And living out her life, she did this constantly, constantly.

She wanted to show up in heaven with empty hands. She wanted to show up in heaven and say, I left it all here Lord. I have nothing to bring to you because I left it all on earth. I mean, how glorious is that? I want to show up in heaven the same way. I left it all there. I did everything you asked me to do. I did it with everything that I had. It's all there. Can you imagine how beautiful that would be? And then you would spend any eternity doing good things, doing the work of the Lord because all of it is accomplished in union with God.

So, we start with prayer and strengthening that personal relationship. The second thing we do is we got to get rid of the obstacles, right? We can't choose joy if you're filled with hate or anger or distractions or jealousy or envy, right? So, the next thing we need to do is go to confession. As my dad used to say, he got to hit the box. Got to hit the box, you got to let it go, right? We all know the song. "Let it go, let it go" I won't sing. But anyways, got to hit the box.

You have to have the Lord step in and repair the bridge in relationship. Pope John Paul II has one of my favorite quotes about confession. He says, "*Confession is an act of honesty and courage and active entrusting ourselves beyond sin to the mercy of a loving and forgiving God.*" How beautiful is that? It's an act of honesty and courage.

God is calling us out of ourselves into laying down our sin in an act of honesty and courage so that He and His divine mercy and grace, might repair the bridge of our broken relationship so

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that we might be able to choose joy because we've gotten rid of all the obstacles in our heart. Removing the obstacles between you and God allows the vessel of grace to be restored.

Why are we so afraid of confession? Why are we so afraid? God already knows what you did. He knows what I did. We need to forgive ourselves for what we've done and not carry around the guilt. If God can forgive us, then we must forgive ourselves. You have to remember God calls you by name, in love. Satan calls you by your sin and your shame. So, we have to choose that forgiveness. We have to choose to receive that forgiveness, receive the mercy, receive the grace so that that reparation is made in that relationship. And we are then able to choose joy and choose even in the most difficult times.

Saint Therese knew that she was not perfect, and she brought every offense to the Father, asking for his forgiveness and then going out and loving in an even more profound way once she was absolved. May we all live as she did. May we all strive to be as holy as she was. This path of holiness for her was hard. It was difficult. And that brings it to the third point for me, which is to offer it up and name it. This beautiful concept of redemptive suffering we have in the Catholic church. In order to choose joy, we have to be able to take whatever suffering comes our way and offer that up to the Lord as gift.

St. Augustine of Hippo said, *"Trials and tribulations offer us a chance to make reparation for our faults and our sins. On such occasions, the Lord comes to us like a physician to heal the wounds left by our sins."* Tribulation is the divine medicine. I don't know about you y'all but I am not a fan of tribulation. It's painful. It hurts. That whole idea of scooping out the bad to be able to fill it with God's mercy and grace. That wound that is left in the middle of my chest when I give it all over. I cannot heal without him.

And so, when we go through these times of hardship, we're given this opportunity to offer that hardship as gift to the Lord God. We're given this beautiful opportunity to love him with our sacrifice, to choose joy and gratitude instead of anger and bad attitude. It changes our perspective to be able to offer up our sufferings for someone else.

But it is so important, and it is such a bomb to the heart when we do it, a bomb to the soul when we accomplish it. Because it leaves room for joy, there's joy there, even in the heart of the most difficult times of our life.

That brings me to the fourth point, which is staying in the present moment.

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla says, *"The secret of happiness is to live moment by moment and to thank God for what he is sending to us every day in his goodness."* Now, I don't know if you are facing difficulty right now. I mean the whole world is facing difficulty, but maybe you got a diagnosis. Maybe you lost your job. Maybe your marriage is in trouble. Maybe your children

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have left the faith. I don't know what hardship you're facing. But I know that if you remain in the present moment and you ask the Lord in, then there is great strength that comes from that.

Love demands an action. We look at the cross, right? We look at the cross, love demands an action. We look at our lady with the beautiful baby in the stable, love demands an action. She had to get on a donkey and go to a foreign land to have a baby in a cave, but she did it out of love. She chose joy and service out of love for our Lord. Staying in the present moment helps us to remain with our Lord in the hardship, in the suffering, in the joy, in the gratitude, in the challenge, whatever it is that is coming for us.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said the past is gone. It cannot be gotten back. And the future has not been given to us, but God has given us today so let us begin. He's given us today so let us begin. So, you've got to let go of what's behind you, not worry about what's in front of you and stay in the moment and stay present with the Lord and watch how he weaves mercy, grace and love throughout your day. It's just so beautiful how he works. Look to God in the mundane of your daily life as you live out your primary vocation. Find Him, find the joy of Him in the sacrament of the present moment.

And this brings us to our final point, which is kind of the biggest point of all of it, which is your will be done. Accepting God's will for your life. This is something I have intimate knowledge of. I had the great privilege and honor of having a beautiful baby girl named Courtney Elizabeth Lenaburg. And for 22 years, I got to love her this side of heaven. My daughter was born perfectly fine, but at the age of five weeks old, she began to have grand mal seizures. And at seven months old, we gave her a medication that she had an allergic reaction to, and it took her sight and left her with profound brain damage. She never spoke. She never walked. She was wheelchair bound and non-ambulatory her whole life. And she suffered greatly. She had seizures, grand mal seizures every single day of her life.

And I remember walking through that with her. And for the first seven years, I did not accept a darn thing. It was a wrestle with God. It was like Jacob wrestling with angel. And I was left with a hitch in my step, until I finally was able to come to a place of complete surrender and be able to accept that my daughter would not be healed the side of heaven. And that my job as her mother was to be her hands and feet. My job was to be able to be her voice, to advocate for her, to take her out into the world and take whatever would come at us. And choose in that moment, joy. An active choice to love, to be grateful, no matter what we were facing.

I think of Saint Faustina with Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. I had to trust in him. And I had to trust in him all the way to the end. And on the day of her death, December 27th, 2014, as I held her in my arms, I had to trust him with whatever my life would look like after her final breath. I had to say yes, like Mary did in the garden to a life I didn't know where it was going to

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go, what it was going to do. It's the same kind of yes, I said, when Courtney was born and everything went awry. I had to choose. I had to make an active decision of love and of gratitude. God has a plan for our lives. It's more awesome than we could imagine, and that's coming from someone who has buried a child. What God has in store for you is so much bigger and so much bolder than you could ever imagine. If we but just accept and surrender. If we say yes with our hands and with our heart. If we choose joy and not sorrow. He wants only the best for us. Each of us is uniquely made, unrepeatable with a special mission given from God.

Our Courtney had a special mission. Her mission was to love. Her mission was to be the face of Christ to anyone she came in contact with and she needed her mom and dad to walk that with her. That child was pure unadulterated joy. And yet the world looked at her and saw only burden, but she was our sunshine, and she was the heart of our home. And she is missed deeply.

Only you can do what you were meant to do, you were sent here to do by God. Only I can complete my mission. Only you can complete yours. And if you don't complete it or I don't complete it, it goes undone. There's nobody else that was made for this mission. And so, I have to choose attitude. All of this leads to joy, leads to gratitude. We learn to look for God in all things.

Saint Therese has this beautiful quote; I'm going to read. *"Everything is a grace. Everything is the direct effect of our Father's love, difficulties, contradictions, humiliations and all the souls' miseries, her burdens, her needs, everything. Because through them she learns humility, realizes her weakness. Everything is a grace because everything is God's gift, whatever be the character of life, or it's an unexpected event. To the heart that loves, all is well."*

Whatever the character of life or it's unexpected events, to the heart that loves all is well. Joy is a direct gift of love. By choosing light and love over pettiness and greed, we choose God. By choosing to be the lowliest of the low, to seek ways within your primary vocation, to do the hard things. And after them, to give it up to God with love. Saint Therese's little way puts the holiness of life within the reach of each and every one of us. When we live out our days with confidence in God and in his love for you, you recognize that each day is a gift in which your life can make a difference by the way you choose to live it. Put hope in a future in which God will be all and love will consume your spirit.

Choose life and light and not darkness. Choose God, choose joy and not sin. 2020 has been one heck of a year, and we've had lots of opportunities to make choices to love. And sometimes we do that very well. And sometimes we haven't done it well at all. Well, here you are in Advent, my brothers and sisters and you're given a whole new opportunity to choose joy, to choose to love, to choose your attitude and find gratitude. To choose your perspective, to be fully present to your neighbors and to love them as God has loved them.

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So, you have a few weeks left, what are you choosing? Are you choosing sin and shame, pettiness and anger, or are you choosing mercy and grace, love and joy? To choose as an active thing, it's not a passive thing. To change our perspective in a negative situation in whatever challenge you may be facing right now As I laid my daughter to rest and stood by her grave as her body was being lowered, I will never forget that moment in my life. I will never forget my son and my husband on either side of me, saying to them, let us not forget the joy of Courtney's life. Let us not forget the lessons this young woman taught us without ever saying a word, because all she could do was love. Simply love.

You have a choice to make every single day. Will you choose joy and light, or will you choose anger, pettiness, greed, darkness? God wishes you to choose Him and to choose Him is to choose joy and to love without boundary. Choosing what is good over what is not so good. May you choose to love this day. May you choose to find joy in the ordinary. May you choose to find Jesus in the face of your neighbor and may you have a most blessed and Holy Advent.