

We need a more robust theology of holy delight

## **Christianity is not only about pain and death. It's about life and joy.**

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration © Scio21 / iStock / Getty)

One of my family's favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*. When my kids were little, they begged to watch the comical, swashbuckling love story of Westley and Buttercup every few months. We watch it less often these days, but we still sigh with nostalgic satisfaction each time the hero and heroine ride off into the night on their beautiful white horses, determined to live happily ever after.

The last time I watched the film, though, I paused for a while over one of Westley's most famous lines. Disguised as the Dread Pirate Roberts (his own alleged killer), he baits Buttercup with recollections of his pirating adventures. When she complains that his stories mock her pain, he responds, "Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something."

“Life is pain.” Ouch. Is that true? Is it true as we begin year three of a global pandemic that has claimed more than 5 million lives? Is it true in light of worsening climate change, racial injustice, political turmoil, financial uncertainty, and spiritual disillusionment? Does Westley’s existential claim apply to people who trust in a good and loving God? Is the Christian life pain, too?

I inherited a version of Christianity that glorified suffering. It overemphasized surrender, self-sacrifice, and submission to the neglect and even exclusion of fulfillment, pleasure, and joy. Unfortunately, I passed this version on to my children, and we are now in the process of deconstructing it together. During a recent conversation, my daughter wondered aloud if Christianity valorizes pain in ways that are dangerously unhealthy, especially for young women. If, she asked, Jesus is the one we’re called to follow, if his demonstration of love on the cross is the highest form of love we humans can aspire to, then what else can a “good Christian life” entail but assured pain?

Christian history—both ancient and recent—has often borne out my daughter’s fear. Our tradition includes a great deal of sanctified suffering. We are heirs to everything from extreme fasting and flagellation to purity culture and fear-based separatism. In popular American culture, Christianity is hardly considered a pleasurable religion. On the contrary, it’s often criticized for its joyless rigidity.

As I think about how to respond to my daughter, I have to contend with the fact that I love and value Christianity’s central affirmation of a Savior who understands human suffering. Ours is a God who knows our pain from the inside out. A God of skin, bone, sinew, and tendon who has wept, bled, ached, and died. The fact that we worship a God of sorrows, “well acquainted with grief,” is one of Christianity’s most profound and rightly treasured truths. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Yet I wonder what we lose when we focus so much on Jesus’ self-emptying sacrifice, as if the shape of the Christian life is *only* cruciform. As if life is pain. Every Sunday morning I, like countless believers around the world, affirm that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” This line from the creed is true. But left unamplified, it can imply that Jesus came to earth only to suffer and die. Didn’t he also come to live? To embody life and life more abundant?

Personally, I wish the creed included a few more lines. As in: I believe in Jesus, who squealed with joy on Mary’s lap, climbed trees with his preschool classmates, and

learned to swim when he was five years old. I believe in Jesus, who whittled wooden sparrows in his father's workshop, played pranks on his younger siblings, and laughed with his friends until tears coursed down his cheeks. I believe in Jesus, who hiked mountains, camped out on beaches, read poetry, considered the lilies, gazed at the stars, cherished fresh bread, savored good wine, experienced crushes, and fell in love. I believe in Jesus, who told the best stories. I believe in Jesus, who played hide-and-seek with children. I believe in Jesus, who sang around campfires. I believe in Jesus who lived.

In "A Brief for the Defense," American poet Jack Gilbert insists that "we must risk delight." No matter the circumstances, we must have "the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world." I would go further: we must not simply risk delight, we must lean into it. Embody it. Proclaim it as a sacred and honorable gift from God.

Maybe, in these days of pandemic and pain, we need a more robust theology of holy delight, one that honors the whole of our experience as human beings. A theology that says Christianity acknowledges the reality of pain and death, but it is not *about* pain and death, it's about life and joy. It's about a God who died so that we can live. It's about a kingdom that enacts justice, equity, and healing so that all of creation can revel in abundant life.

I'm still learning how to hold the tension between death and life, pain and pleasure. I'm still sorting out what it means to take up my cross while I also risk delight. I don't always know how to do both, but I'm convinced that both matter to God. Life is many things, and yes, it includes pain. But not to the exclusion and neglect of joy. To follow Christ is to embrace Christ's joy and to trust that God will make that joy complete in us.

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