

This is an essay submitted by OAFP member Doug Collins, MD. Dr. Collins wrote this essay for his department's monthly wellness meeting during Holy Week.

An Interfaith Homily: Choose Joy

(For our DFCM family on what is celebrated as Holy Week for many)

There's a pithy, wise phrase that's been on my mind a lot lately. It's from the Book of James in the New Testament of the Bible and paraphrased says, "Consider it JOY when you encounter trials of various kinds..."

In the thick of this trial of the COVID pandemic, we are well aware of plenty of "bad stuff" from hoarding to economic hardship and unemployment, the anxiety produced by the very real shadow of a deadly disease, the grief of loss when death comes.

But just as our Cincinnati, OH, winter has once again given way to the power, beauty, and promise of new, blossoming life and chirping robins in spring, we each also have an awareness of lots of "good things" amidst this trial—the hidden blessings and silver linings that every trial brings:

- The opportunity it has given to force telehealth to happen
- The humor and creativity given by others to encourage us all, like Abby Holliday's fun tune and the Holliday family video just featured in UC's news
- The love of family. In a season of social distancing, I don't think I've ever seen so many families going for walks together in our neighborhood, as moms and dads multi-task to help their kids continue to learn, and teenagers learn about sacrificial love sheltering in place to protect the older generations
- The generosity of so many, from individuals to large corporations: like the "Clifton Cares" donors funding great local restaurants on Ludlow Ave. to give free meals to healthcare workers; or wealthy stars like the NBA's Zion Williamson, donating huge amounts of money to help the employees of their respective closed stadiums; or large corporations like Uhaul offering 30 days of free storage to college students
- The compassion of organizations and faith communities, praying for their communities and leaders, organizing food, blood drives and compassion funds
- The innovation of car companies like GM, Ford, and Tesla utilizing their technology and spare parts to rapidly launch manufacturing of ventilators

- The flexibility and hard-work of all of you, my department colleagues, going to bat for each other; our amazing residents saying yes over and over to each other for various coverage requests; and for doctors signing up to be on call for hospital or clinic duty.

It's important—vital—that we look for these goods. “Consider it JOY when you encounter trials of various kinds”— it's not just a wise phrase, it's really an imperative, a “command.” “*Consider it joy.*” In other words—*choose* Joy, make the cognitive-behavioral-therapy-like deliberate choice, with deliberate discipline, to *choose* to find good; to remember *hope*.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth famously wrote that “joy is a defiant nevertheless.” There is a *defiance* in choosing joy. A deliberate choice to focus on good, to accept sorrow and grief, and yet to know that they do not get the last word.

Choosing joy is not choosing to live deceived in ignorance of what is really true, it's choosing joy because there are goods and truths deeper and stronger than the sorrow and the darkness. It's choosing joy because, as Aragorn son of Arathorn tells the young boy Haleth as the darkness grows before the Battle at Helms Deep in the Lord of the Rings, “There is always hope.”

The full statement from James is “Consider it *pure* joy when you encounter trials of various kinds, because you know the testing of your faith produces endurance.”

Trials test us. They test our spirit, our worldviews, our inner mettle – and help us grow stronger. The testing of trials produces a deepening of character, a greater perseverance, and an opportunity for sacrificial love.

Trials remind us that there are no guarantees in life—that we must look out for each other, especially the vulnerable, and that ultimately, in another sense, we are all vulnerable.

Trials are an opportunity to take stock of how we're doing, asking hard questions like, “Am I more anxious about this than I should be? Why is that?” Or to observe, “I'm being too impatient with my kids—why is that? Is that my own selfishness? Or am I just exhausted and need to rest?”

I'm sure you, like me, have thought a lot about both ends of this trial, the bad and the good, but I wanted to pass on this encouragement to see that joy is “a defiant nevertheless.” Let's make the deliberate daily choice to deny anxiety and hopelessness a hold – to defy them, and *choose* joy.