

## **Joy and Gratitude**

### **Joy Cometh**

Nicole Mirando

When my dear friend Sandra asked me to write an article for this month's issue of *Vestry Papers* about gratitude and the joy that pets bring to our 'single girl' lives, I thought, *Sure, I can channel my inner Carrie Bradshaw*. Truth be told, as I sit at my laptop in my apartment, looking out the window, I remind myself that I am, in fact, a single girl living in New York City, albeit different from the protagonist of *Sex and the City* in many ways. For one, there isn't a powerfully handsome and successful man calling out to me from the street, who has just arrived in an expensive car with his driver (well, maybe in my imagination). Second, and most relevant, Carrie didn't have a dog. I'll spare readers the other differences between me and the fictitious, fashionable, cigarette-smoking, iconic New York City writer.

### **It was meant to be**

Moving on... I adopted my pup, Linus, in May of 2012 and would soon realize just how much he was actually going to rescue me. In a relationship at the time, I was ready for a dog, but browsing *petfinder.com* only somewhat seriously. Until, that is, one search led me to a tiny, scraggly, big-eared and admittedly not that cute-looking, shih tzu mix puppy. Despite the signs pointing to disappointment on my end, the cliché, "it was meant to be," was true as I drove back to Baltimore, my home at the time, with Linus in the back seat.

The Bible tells us in Psalm 30:5, that "joy cometh in the morning." Linus, for me, is a tangible reminder of that truth. Unbeknownst at the time, my personal life was about to change dramatically, and that particular Psalm was going to play a major role. My twelve years in Baltimore City saw me through college and graduate school, the start of a career, eight years with one boyfriend and buying my first home. Charm City holds a special place in my heart and marks the beginning of life with my fiercely loyal and stubborn little rescue pup.

That August, only a few short months after bringing home my "Sweet Babboo," I lost my Aunt Gerri unexpectedly. This was Linus's first opportunity to serve as my default therapist. His unconditional love and honest truth, despite my somewhat distracted attention, never wavered. Losing one of my 'mothers' was painfully dark, yet somehow the sun continued to rise each morning. As if he knew I needed some extra love, Linus was that very joy that cometh in the morning, arriving with kisses and quirks that reminded me of all I have to be grateful for, even in the midst of sadness.

### **Through thick and thin**



In 2017, I made the painful decision to end the relationship with my boyfriend and move back home to New Jersey. It was an emotional and difficult time, but again, because of Linus, joy did cometh in the morning. Throughout the breakup and tearful goodbye from my first home, my joy was consistently and faithfully present to remind me with zoomies and grumbles for treats, that we would get through it. And to quote another cliché, “learning a lesson from my dog,” Linus was once again the experienced professional. I would say that the gratitude I have for his rescuing me is unimaginable, but I don’t have to imagine it. I experience it.

Joy, literally and figuratively, comes in the morning. When I open my eyes and roll over in bed, I am awakened by loads of kisses, as if Linus is saying “good morning.” The very first thing to greet me after a night of sleep is joy. I am immediately thankful and filled with awe as my scruffy alarm clock helps me start the day with his encouragement and positivity. My tiny rescue dog has been by my side for nearly ten years now. The laughter and genuine happiness he brings me each day never lessen, no matter how many times I’ve seen his quirky behavior on walks or precious snaggletooth-smile or angry growl when breakfast is delayed (and yes, he can tell time).

Since the breakup and move to Jersey, Linus has moved apartments a total of six times, twice to Manhattan. I am happy to be back near my family, and I had been loving life in New York City. But as it often does, sadness shows up and reminds us of the life’s reality, as if to say, *Oh wait, not too much happy now.*

After nearly two years of fighting cancer, my other ‘mother’ – after all, we are Italian – Aunt Donna, died last year in October. Another goodbye to a strong and lifelong presence in my life, and more sorrow, not easy to overcome. There is a bittersweet (okay, mostly bitter) irony at losing two beautiful souls among others in the past twelve years, and the reminder it brings of the preciousness of life.

### **A faithful reminder of joy and gratitude**

With this emotionally difficult period, begins chapter three of Linus’s book of psychological wisdom and healing. Of course I don’t wish for more sadness, but at the same time, I cannot say I am not grateful for his manifestation of this particular Psalm. For nearly ten years, and I pray ten more, Linus has made joy cometh in the morning. I am truly blessed by my very own faithful reminder of joy and gratitude. I close with a few more clichés, because there is truth in them. Who rescued whom? Well, if you haven’t discovered it by now, Linus rescued me. He saves my life every day – even with his giant, loud burp after every meal. I have much to be happy and grateful for in this beautiful life, but no more precious reminder of all that life can bring to an individual than Linus. My regret is for other single girls missing the opportunity and love of a rescue pup. Finally, I offer these wise words from W.R. Purche, “everyone thinks they have the best dog, and none of them are wrong.” As a single girl already living in Manhattan with the love of my life, who needs a man!

As I finish this week’s edition of *Dogs and the City* – Oh wait, I’m not actually the 2021 version of Carrie Bradshaw – I genuinely thank readers for indulging this scruffy and attitudinal glimpse into my life. I’m honored to have been able to write about my joy. And to Linus, this one is for you.

P.S. No, I did not forget the months and months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Who wants to read any more about it? But obviously, Linus was there for that too, throughout quarantine and working from home and shopping for fashionable face masks.

*Nicole Mirando works as assistant dean at a New York City graduate school. Actively involved in dog rescue for about ten years, she spends her free time either with her family in New Jersey or with her pup Linus exploring Manhattan. Otherwise, Nicole spends time doing homework as she pursues a doctorate of education alongside her other passion – helping save deserving and unconditionally loving pets in need. This is her first online article.*

**Resources:**

- [Lessons from My Dog: Letting Go](#) by Jeremiah Sierra, ECF Vital Practices blog, October 5, 2015
- [Pet Evangelism](#) by Nancy Davidge, ECF Vital Practices blog, March 4, 2011
- [The Church Cat](#) by Lisa G. Fischbeck, ECF Vital Practices blog, July 18, 2019
- [Pets: Resources from the Episcopal Network for Animal Welfare](#), an ECF Vital Practices tool

**A Pandemic Church Plant Inspires Joy**

Beth Wyndham

The story of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in the Texas Hill County shouldn't exist – except that God is good and God's people are faithful.

Affectionately known as St. Nick's, this community of faith began public worship just two months before lockdown in March of 2020. The Reverend Beth Wyndham, her husband Jeremy and joy-filled members of the launch team were committed to building an Episcopal presence in Bulverde regardless of the ability to be together in person. Instead of giving up, they built solid, Christ-centered relationships and have grown in spite of adversity.

In this vlog, [Being Joyful](#), Beth and Jeremy reflect on the joys of the past 18 months as St. Nick's went from worshipping in a yoga studio, to figuring out online worship, to purchasing a restaurant building in the heart of downtown, to becoming a vital community partner in Bulverde. All of this, because they had faith that God would see them through, and so they listened to the Holy Spirit as they danced and wove their way through the unknown.

**Part I: A church centered on joy**

Before they could begin, they needed a name. Beth tells how they came to name this new faith community St. Nicholas and why that name fit their vision.

*What place does joy hold in your congregation's life and ministry?*

**Part II: Change of plans**

As the world went into lockdown, St. Nick's had to "question what we're doing and what is church and who do we understand ourselves to be." Hear Rev. Beth's reflection, beginning at 47 seconds into the vlog.

*During the pandemic, how did you and your congregation re-evaluate what it means to be church?*

### **Part III: Discover community**

Now that the people of St. Nick's are vaccinated and able to meet their neighbors, they work diligently to participate in community events and to invite others to their own events. "Sometimes," Beth says, "we get so busy with our churches that we forget there is a world to meet." Beginning at 1 minute, 53 seconds, she and Jeremy show images from the free craft tent at the town's *Musik in the Park*, as well as how they engaged the community at their first annual Animal Blessing.

*How has your community been present beyond your doors? Are there more ways you can authentically engage with local events and ministries? How are you spreading joy in your neighborhood?*

### **Part IV: Using social media for good**

By approaching the lockdown with an open mind about ministry, St. Nick's saw the move to social media and online church as a blessing of the Holy Spirit. Instead of waiting years to begin effective online ministry, the pandemic forced their hand. Early on, Beth and Jeremy decided that they would engage in online ministry and not just online presence. What's the difference? They describe their efforts and their thinking beginning at 5 minutes, 35 seconds.

*How is your community ministering through online offerings?*

### **Part V: Pets and nature in worship?**

One plan St. Nick's launch team never considered was to offer an outdoor, pet-friendly worship on Sunday mornings. Then, in order to address the safety and health of their parishioners and to offer an in-person worship opportunity during the pandemic, they started an outdoor service that is now a vibrant and essential part of their Sunday morning worship experience. Listen, beginning at 7 minutes, 43 seconds.

*Does your community of faith know how to change plans when the Holy Spirit whispers? Are there new ways of being and doing church that you hesitate to embrace because they don't align with your plans?*

### **Part VI: Leadership and the 99**

Rooting its joy and gratitude in the story of the Lost Sheep, the community of St. Nick's has been faithful to listening to how God is calling his church to exist in the Texas Hill Country. The launch team has built relationships and been empowered to lead in ways that they never imagined. Beginning at 9 minutes, 8 seconds, Beth and Jeremy speak on how their leadership has changed in light of all they have learned.

*Looking for a way to encourage your church leadership to reflect on their joy and gratitude as a community? Offer this video, or at least this final section of the vlog, as a devotional before your next*

*Vestry or Bishop's Committee meeting. Invite your leadership to see where the Holy Spirit has been calling your community of faith.*

*The **Reverend Beth Wyndham** is the founding pastor at St. Nicholas Hill Country Episcopal Church in Spring Branch, Texas. Prior to this she was the Associate Rector at St. Thomas in San Antonio. She is married to Jeremy Wyndham and has a great love for silly looking pets, writing, reading, painting and creating children's books.*

**Resources:**

- [Lessons for all Churches from Church Planting](#), an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Susan Brown Snook, May 19, 2015
- [Planted Seed Sprouts in Service](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, August 18, 2017
- [Riding Shotgun](#) by Richelle Thompson, ECF Vital Practices blog, October 11, 2010
- [Out of Many, One: New River Regional Ministry](#) by Rosa Lindahl Mallow, Vestry Papers, September 2011

**The Joy and Gratitude Within**

Kathy Culmer

*Storyteller Kathy Culmer begins her reflection on joy and gratitude by telling us [this story](#).*

Sometimes I think we don't recognize joy because we're expecting it to look and feel like laughter, when joy may be more about what prompts the laughter or lingers after or what sustains us when we can't find the laughter. Joy is there even when the laughter isn't, because the Source of our gladness resides within us and we know is working all things together for our good. The joy of the Lord, when fully *real-eyes'd* (aka, realized) gives us strength.

Like joy, I wonder if gratitude, too, can't be misunderstood when we think that it exists on the condition of our getting something, especially something pleasant or desired or hoped for. Gratitude goes deeper than simply finding the right words to respond to what we get, though words are perhaps the most convenient way we have to express it. But it, too, must come from a deeper place. It, too, must reside within us; otherwise, it becomes mere lip service.

Both joy and gratitude are a way of seeing and of being. They do not come and go. They are not conditional, but fully express themselves in the way we see and live our lives. That is why the man of faith in the story was able to see the goodness of God in every unfortunate occurrence. If joy is the lens that lets us see the blessing in our blessings, then it is gratitude that frames our response.

Gratitude gives us reason for celebrating all we have been given, whether because of, or in spite of, what it might be. And joy keeps us celebrating, even when given no reason. This is the day that the Lord has made; I will rejoice and be glad ... be grateful ... come what may, just because I got to be in it.

***Kathy Culmer** is an author, storyteller, speaker, teacher and retreat leader. A graduate of Spelman College, the University of South Florida, and United Theological Seminary with a D.Min. in Biblical Storytelling, she has taught on the secondary and college levels in a variety of subject areas that include*

*English, Speech Communications, Broadcast Journalism and Religious Education. Kathy was the Mission Funding Coordinator for the Diocese of Texas from 2007 to 2013 and currently serves as Director of Religious Education for St. James Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. She is author of the story series: "Moving Forward in Faith: The African American Experience in the Diocese of Texas."*

#### **Resources:**

- [Just Plain Joy](#) by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices blog, December 22, 2017
- ["Sparking Joy" in Your Faith](#) by Nelson Mendoza, ECF Vital Practices blog, June 7, 2019
- [A Personal Take on Gratitude](#) by Jeremiah Sierra, ECF Vital Practices blog, August 10, 2015
- [Gratitude & The Pursuit of Happiness](#) by Laurel Johnston, ECF Vital Practices blog, October 14, 2011

#### **Bold, Magnificent and True**

Philip DeVaul and Max Firesheets

*Tuesdays at 11 am on YouTube, Philip DeVaul, rector of Church of the Redeemer in Cincinnati, and Kira Austin-Young, priest-in-charge at St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Nashville, host Are You There God? It's Kira & Phil. In [this segment](#) from September 14, 2021, Paul and Redeemer parishioner Max Firesheets discuss Max's journey and faith as a transgendered person and the liturgy celebrating that journey with joy.*

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," Mary cries out. I've misinterpreted her words far too often, as if Mary is simply saying she's extremely happy. But the words aren't about her feelings. They're about her soul – her core identity, the essence of her being. Mary's *soul* proclaims the greatness of the Lord. Like the Psalmist, who writes that the very heavens declare God's glory, simply by being themselves, Mary's saying that her soul, her being, the simple fact of her being herself, is a testament to God's greatness. This is bold. It is magnificent. And it is true. Mary speaks the truth.

When my parishioner and friend Max told me they were preparing to change their name, they asked if the church would be willing to recognize that change liturgically. This was the culmination of a journey Max and our church had been taking together for some time. The Church of the Redeemer walked with Max and their family through a divorce, through Max's discernment of their gender and sexuality and through Max's affirmation of themselves as transgender. And while Redeemer has identified itself as LGBTQ+ affirming for some time, Max's journey was a first for us as a worshiping community. And it was a first for me as a priest. I have learned so much about faithfulness from Max – about Max's faithfulness, yes – but also about the faithfulness of God.

Throughout our journey, it is God who has been faithful to us, who has stuck with us and guided us when we weren't sure what the next step would be. I have seen Max respond to and embody God's faithfulness. I hope Max has seen God's faithfulness in their church.

So when Max asked if we could recognize their name within the liturgy of the church, the answer was yes, because how could it not be? We had come to see that the simple fact of Max being themselves was a testament to God's greatness. Max's insistence was bold, magnificent and true. What you'll see here is a bit of how God was working in our shared life, as the people of Redeemer stood shoulder to

shoulder with Max in Jesus' name, renewed our Baptismal Covenant and proclaimed the greatness of the Lord, whose faithfulness is without end.

*The Rev. Philip DeVaul is currently serving as Rector at The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Cincinnati, OH.*

#### Resources:

- [Discipleship from the Margins](#), an ECF webinar presented by Dr. Sandra Montes with David Patiño and Atticus Zavaletta, June 12, 2019
- [We Gather Together: Conversations on Same-Gender Blessings](#) by Peter Strimer, ECF Vital Practices blog, March 22, 2011
- [We Gather Together: Conversations on Same-Gender Blessings 2](#) by Peter Strimer, ECF Vital Practices blog, March 24, 2011
- [Living Into Our Ministries](#) by Sam Magill, an ECF Vital Practices tool

### **Vendrá la alegría**

Nicole Mirando

Cuando mi querida amiga Sandra me pidió que escribiera este artículo para el número de este mes de *Papeles de la Junta Parroquial* sobre la gratitud y alegría que las mascotas traen a las vidas de las mujeres que vivimos solas, pensé *Por supuesto, puedo canalizar mi Carrie Bradshaw interna*. La realidad es que ahora que estoy sentada en mi apartamento mirando por la ventana, me recuerdo a mí misma que de hecho soy una mujer soltera que vive en la Ciudad de Nueva York, si bien de muchas maneras no me asemejo a *Sex and the City* (el programa de televisión *Sexo y Nueva York*). Para empezar, ningún hombre poderoso, exitoso y guapísimo me pidió que salga con él y me pasó a buscar en un automóvil carísimo con chofer. Segundo, y esto es lo más importante, Carrie no tenía un perro. No voy a aburrir a mis lectores con las otras diferencias entre mí y la icónica escritora neoyorquina ficticia, al último grito de la moda y fumadora de cigarrillos.

#### **Tenía que ser**

Pasando a otro tema... adopté mi cachorrito, Linus, en mayo de 2012 y poco después me di cuenta de que el rescatador era él. En ese entonces estaba en una relación y estaba lista para tener un perro, pero no estaba mirando *petfinder.com* con seriedad, hasta que en una búsqueda me topé con un perrito chiquitito, desaliñado y orejudo que estaba muy lejos de ser un adorable cachorro mezcla shih tzu. A pesar de que todos los indicadores apuntaban a que terminaría por desilusionarme, el cliché "tenía que ser" resultó ser cierto cuando manejé de vuelta a Baltimore, mi hogar en ese entonces, con Linus en el asiento de atrás.

La Biblia nos dice en el Salmo 30:5, que "en la mañana vendrá la alegría". Para mí, Linus, es un recordatorio tangible de esa verdad. Sin que yo lo supiera en ese momento, mi vida personal estaba por cambiar completamente y ese Salmo iba a desempeñar un papel importante. En mis doce años en la Ciudad de Baltimore pasé por la universidad y la escuela de posgrado, inicié una carrera, pasé ocho años con un novio y compré mi primera hogar. Baltimore tiene un lugar especial en mi corazón y es el principio de mi vida con un cachorrito de rescate ferozmente leal y tozudo.



Ese agosto, a los pocos meses de haber traído mi dulce cachorrito a mi hogar, perdí inesperadamente a mi tía Gerri. Esa fue la primera oportunidad para que Linus me sirviera de terapeuta. Su amor incondicional y su honesta verdad, a pesar de que mi atención no era la mejor en ese entonces, jamás flaqueó. Perder a una de mis ‘mamas’ fue dolorosamente oscuro, pero de alguna manera, el sol siguió brillando todos los amaneceres. Como si hubiera sabido que necesitaba una mayor dosis de amor, Linus fue esa alegría que viene en la mañana, acercándose a mí con besitos y payasadas que me recordaban todas las cosas por las que debería estar agradecida, incluso en medio de mi tristeza.

### **Contra vientos y mareas**

En 2017, tomé la dolorosa decisión de dar fin a la relación con mi novio y de mudarme de vuelta a mi hogar, Nueva Jersey. Fue una época emocional y difícil, pero nuevamente, gracias a Linus, a la mañana venía la alegría. Durante la ruptura y la llorosa despedida de mi primer hogar, mi alegría estaba permanente y fielmente presente para recordarme con explosiones de energía y gruñidos para que le diera golosinas, que pasaríamos por ese trance. Y cito otro cliché: “aprender una lección de mi perro”. Linus nuevamente era el profesional experto. Yo diría que la gratitud que siento hacia él por haberme rescatado es inimaginable, pero no tengo que imaginarla porque la siento.

La alegría, literal y figurativamente, viene en la mañana. Cuando abro los ojos y me doy vuelta en la cama, Linus me despierta con montones de besos, como si me estuviera diciendo “buen día”. Lo primero que me saluda después de haber dormido por la noche es la alegría. Inmediatamente me siento agradecida y sobrecogida cuando mi vivaz alarma desaliñada me ayuda a iniciar el día con su estímulo y positividad. Mi perrito de rescate ahora ha estado conmigo por casi diez años. La risa y la alegría genuina que me trae todos los días nunca disminuye, independientemente de cuántas veces vi su comportamiento estrafalario cuando lo saco a caminar o su enternecedora sonrisa con dientes torcidos o su gruñido enojado cuando se atrasa el desayuno (y sí, él puede decir la hora).

Desde la separación y la mudanza a Jersey, Linus se mudó de apartamento seis veces, dos a Manhattan. Me alegra estar de vuelta cerca de mi familia y me encanta mi vida en la Ciudad de Nueva York. Pero como lo hace a menudo, la tristeza aparece y nos recuerda la realidad de la vida, como diciendo, *Espera, no demasiada alegría ahora.*

Después de haber batallado un cáncer por casi dos años, mi otra ‘mamá’ – después de todo, somos italianos –, mi tía Donna falleció en octubre del año pasado. Otro adiós a una fuerte presencia en toda mi vida y más sufrimiento, difícil de sobreponer. Hay una ironía agri dulce (bueno, mayormente agria) en la pérdida de dos almas hermosas entre otras en los últimos doce años y el recordatorio de la preciosidad de la vida.

### **Un fiel recordatorio de alegría y gratitud**

Con este período emocionalmente difícil, empieza el tercer capítulo del libro de Linus sobre sabiduría y curación psicológica. Por supuesto que no deseo más tristeza, pero al mismo tiempo no puedo decir que no estoy agradecida por la manifestación de este Salmo. Por diez años – y pido por diez más - Linus ha



causado que la alegría venga en la mañana. Me siento bendecida por mi propio recordatorio de la alegría y la gratitud.

Finalizo con otros clichés, porque encierran verdades. ¿Quién rescató a quién? Bueno, si todavía no lo descubrieron, Linus me rescató a mí. Me salva la vida todos los días, incluso con sus eructos gigantescos después de cada comida. Tengo muchos motivos para estar feliz y agradecida por esta hermosa vida, pero no hay un recordatorio más precioso de todo lo que puede traer esta vida que un individuo como Linus. Lamento que otras mujeres solteras estén perdiendo la oportunidad de rescatar y querer a un perro de rescate. Finalmente, ofrezco estas sabias palabras de W.R. Purche, “todos piensan que tienen el mejor perro y ninguno de ellos está equivocado”. Como mujer soltera viviendo en Manhattan con el amor de mi vida, ¿quién necesita un hombre?

Al terminar el número de esta semana de *Los perros en Nueva York* – ah, un momento, no soy de ninguna manera la versión 2021 de Carrie Bradshaw – agradezco genuinamente a los lectores por permitir esta ojeada a mi vida, desaliñada y plena de actitud. Me honra haber podido escribir sobre alegría. Y Linus, esto es para ti.

P.D. No, no olvidé los meses y meses de la pandemia de la COVID-19. ¿Quién quiere leer todavía más acerca de ella? Pero, obviamente, Linus también estuvo a mi lado para eso, durante la cuarentena, trabajando desde casa y buscando comprar mascarillas a la moda.

*Nicole Mirando trabaja como vicedecana adjunta en una universidad de posgrado de la Ciudad de Nueva York. Desde hace unos diez años ha estado participando activamente en el rescate de perros y pasa su tiempo libre ya sea con su familia en Nueva Jersey o con su perrito explorando Manhattan. Además, Nicole dedica tiempo a estudiar para el doctorado en educación que está en vías de obtener y a su otra pasión: ayudar a mascotas necesitadas que lo merecen y brindan su amor incondicionalmente. Este es su primer artículo en línea.*

**Recursos:**

- [Pet Blessings: Resources/Recursos de los Animales](#) por Carol Barnwell, an ECF Vital Practices tool
- [Amenaza Triple](#) por Adialyn Milien, Vestry Papers, julio 2020
- [Oración y acción en una pandemia](#) por Yesenia (Jessie) Alejandro, Vestry Papers, septiembre 2020