



Joy As a Companion to Grief:
A Round Table Conversation on Life Together
August 26, 2026

Adam Mixon: Hey, this is Adam from the Ministry Collaborative. I'm sitting here with my colleagues, Jennifer Watley Maxell, and my good friend, Pastor Carla Jones Brown. We're on the tail end of a conversation about naming, and tending to, and realizing our grief, and the healthy ways that we can process it; the deep theological underpinnings and response that we have to our grief. But we've, kind of, shifted into a conversation about joy. As we talk, we're not skipping the step of just how fraught our times are, because there is plenty to lament. But in this conversation, we're going to be talking, just for a little while, about what is bringing us joy, what's exciting us, and what's inspiring us in this season. Carla, let's start with you, because you're smiling. What's bringing you joy right now?

Carla Jones Brown: I am the colleague known as Carla Jones Brown, pastor at Oxford Presbyterian Church. So, Adam, you invited me to share about my joy, because I was smiling. And so, I feel compelled to say, "Do not confuse my smile with a sense of joy." My smile is because I am on screen with folks I don't often get to see. And so, looking at your faces is something that gives me some joy on a Tuesday. There are times when I feel joy, and you can't tell just from looking at my face.

One of the things that's giving me joy is my friends who have middle schoolers who are going off to their dances, and they invite "Auntie" over to see them off. And I get to iron their shirts, and make a fuss, and tell them, "Listen: this is how you hold your jacket, if you want to be G. And when you take your pictures, this is how you hold your hands." And then they actually do it. And then they think I'm cool, because I gave them good advice. That is giving me joy.

Pictures of a dear friend, whose baby was in the hospital for a complete year, who is now court side at Liberty basketball games: that is giving me joy. But as we talked about cycles, there was a period of grief and anxiety – not knowing if that baby was ever going to come home. And, do we put the crib together or don't we? We do. And she's out, and she is at the games, sitting in the box with the important people. That is a tremendous source of joy that sits alongside news reports of other people's children who are not making it home.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: I really appreciate you naming that tension, Carla, because I do think that – particularly for so many people who are involved in justice work and advocacy, and who are living daily realities of being on the front lines of tending to a lot of the horrific atrocities and things that are going on in our context – part of our responsibility (theologically, as well as to ourselves) is to cultivate joy. It's very easy to not do that, to see joy as happiness, to see joy as episodic, and to see joy as contrary to the horrors versus a companion of. And I think that, when we view joy as a companion to grief, and to all of the other things, it really gives us not just permission, but it becomes kind of a mandate that we cultivate joy.

I'm walking through a very, very intense season of grief. My grandmother passed in the last couple of weeks. My mother passed seven months ago. My father-in-law passed a year ago. And in the midst of that, I've lost some very close personal friends. I'm experiencing grief in a way I've never experienced it before. What I am learning is that, as persistent as grief is, it will have its day. That's the measure of persistence I need to have. And also cultivating joy: it is not a denial of the grief. It is a recognition that

the grief needs to be accompanied by something. I choose, because I am a believer, to accompany it with the joy of the Lord, which is our strength. That's gospel, right? It's still gospel, right? And so, learning what that looks like, and not feeling guilty for that.

I recently went to a Jill Scott concert, and somebody was like, "Oh, with everything going on, I was surprised to see you at the concert."

And I was just like, "Yeah, I'm not going to let you shame me for going out the house, and for not giving over to despair, and not taking this moment and enjoying it." And I feel like we're in a culture right now where people, particularly social media and things, they're just expecting people to be down and stay down. And when people are trying to come out of the hole, there are these people who want to beat you back in it.

And I really think we have to resist that. And I think the way to resist that is by cultivating joy in any way we can. Like you said: the little moments, the big moments, really holding onto the promise and the hope. Because if we don't have hope, if we lose track of that hope, then where do we find the wherewithal to keep going and to keep fighting and advocating and doing the work that we are called to do?

Adam: Yeah. I appreciate what you all have said so much. It's so relevant. Like you, Jen, I buried both my parents. I buried my best friend. In the midst of transition and ministry, there's a lot for me to want to crawl under my bed or curl up under my desk. But I was listening to a documentary about Thoreau a couple weeks ago. There was this amazing line about how the world laughs in flowers; and how despite this onslaught of bad news and personal grief, we still live in a world that has flowers in it. And I hear in that, Jennifer, the joy of the Lord. I see these reminders, and they are not subtle. Clouds and sky and grass and plant are testifying constantly to me of the presence of a good God, even in a world that is fraught, and in a way that's not superficial. It doesn't ignore the grief, but there is a refrain that insists on the joy.

Yeah, I can't really put that into any words, but that's what's giving me life. That's what's guarding my heart from bitterness and depression and despair. And then there's the reminder, like you said earlier, of the messages from friends who we share this journey with. When I think of Hebrews 12 and the great cloud of witnesses, yes, I think of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Esther, Ruth and Naomi; but I think of Carla, and I think of Jennifer. I think of those that God has blessed me to be with on this journey, and it's deeply encouraging.

Jennifer: And I think that's a great word to remind us of, because I think there's so much isolation, and there are so many people who are siloed off. We know that ministry leadership in general can be extremely lonely work. And there are times where we do feel like we're out there on that mountain, or in the middle of the desert, or the middle of the ocean by ourselves. I think being aware of, like you said, Adam, those people who give you life, and those people who see you, and are willing to sit with you. When I think about the story of Job, there's this picture of Job, kind of, sitting on the ash heap, picking at his scabs. And there are these friends around. Even though what they're saying is not what I would say, it's not necessarily encouraging, but they are there. He is not by himself. And I think that, theologically, even that's a word for us, in terms of maintaining community and maintaining the brotherhood and the sisterhood.

Because again, I think a lot of us, when things go dark, things get hard, we go insular, we go inside. And again, some of that is necessary, but there's a difference between solitude and isolation. There's a difference between stealing away and taking time with God, and just walling yourself off from your friends and your family, thuggin' it out: "I'm going to just go it alone." That's not what we see in Scripture in terms of how we are to navigate these times. And so, I think the call for community, and for us to continue to take those calls and to reach out to one another, I think, is really a powerful illustration of something that is very practical that, maybe sometimes, we probably don't even think about.

Just picking up the phone, just sending that text, just sending a card, a note that says, "Hey, I know the times is tough, but I'm thinking about you. I see you. I feel you."

Carla: Jen, I think that is just so on point. I have friends, too, in particular, who call me every holiday: "Carla, did you go somewhere and get a plate? Do I need to send somebody with a plate to your house? Because I know you didn't leave the house," because the holiday is Saturday and typically I have to work on the Sunday.

These are friends who give me the room to say, "Oh yeah, y'all know I'm in my shell." Or, "No, I'm good. I'm solitary. I'm not escaping. I'm not running away. I'm in my space. Thank you so much." And we all know our roles, and how that plays out in these particular friend groups. I am especially grateful for them.

And then I have other friend groups where I'm that person who's always doing the check-in, "Hey, I haven't seen you, haven't heard from you. You good? You need a Cash App? What you need? You need Grubhub?" Because I'm good for sending somebody a meal.

Jennifer: I mean, that's a great way to show love.

Adam: Food'll do.

Jennifer: And that's a great way to feel love: remembering those people in those moments and those times is incredibly important.

One of the things that has been bringing me joy recently is I've started reading fiction again, because so much of what I read is non-fiction. And so much of what I read is keeping abreast of issues, and honing my craft, and stuff that informs not just my preaching, but my leadership. But there's not a lot of, I'll say, imagination that is stirred up in me. And so, when I read fiction, it gives me a portal for my imagination to flourish in a way that it ordinarily doesn't. And, I'll admit it: it's escapism. Some of it is escapism. And I don't think escapism is always a bad thing. Sometimes you do need a place, whether it's a good old series you can binge for seven episodes, kind of leave the world behind, whether it is going to that place in nature that you enjoy. For me, one of my escapist place is a good novel. And don't let it be on Audible. Oh my gosh, that's like...

Adam: I appreciate the reminder, Jennifer, about creativity, and how creativity requires hope. Otherwise, the lack of creativity is almost a result of, like, desperation, lack of inspiration. Which, again, we've kind of been framing out how to name grief, and then how to move through it; and how, yes, there's space for the inward, but that's not where we reside, because we are oriented toward a hope, a living hope, right? So that inward moves to the upward, and the upward moves to the outward, and is worked out and manifests relationally. Otherwise, the alternative being: the inward becoming

downward. And for me, downward means backwards. I have some tendencies there already. So I'm like, "Thank God for, again, those who travel with me, those who will be like, 'Yo, where are you? Like, what are you doing?'" Because the tendency to want to retreat, and I say, crawl under my bed or whatever, yeah, it's real. It's real, so... But that orientation toward hope – and for me, when I say "hope", I'm always speaking of the living hope that I have in the resurrection; which, again, is the tail end of some really bad crap happening. The living hope is, you know, that after this, you know...

Carla: This is such a tangent. In the movie, *Shall We Dance?* Toward the end, there is a line that happens – I don't know – between Susan Sarandon and Richard Gere somewhere. But she says to someone that the point of their marriage is that there is someone who is there to witness what is happening. That's part of life together. That makes me think of congregational life, and where we find joy. Yesterday, someone sent me an email to tell me that she loved the hymn that I picked on Sunday, which tickled me, because I never assumed that everybody's going to love... "Pastor Carla picked the hymns. They're all winners." They are not. But it's an old hymn that I remember from my childhood, and I remember being taught, and the hymn is "Wonderful Words of Life".

And she tells me this whole, like, why this meant so much to her. And I just thought, "This is the good day. This is on the highlight reel of things that make pastors happy."

And she also said, "And by the way, your sermon was good, too," but the focus was this song that we sang together, and how those words held meaning for her more than just on Sunday, but what she brought to the party. Now I know more about her. Now, every time I see her, we'll do a call and response: "Beautiful words, wonderful words." That gives, like, an ongoing kind of joy, not an episodic joy.

Jennifer: As we look at young people coming to church and looking for faith community, and explicitly wanting connection, I think that idea of witnessing each other's lives can be so incredibly helpful as we try to discern how do we disciple and evangelize this next generation – being faithful witnesses of not just our relationship with God, but being faithful witnesses of our life that we hold in common, and how God is moving, and what God is doing in each other's lives, and what joy that brings. We've been doing this summer, our sermon series, has been "Joyride". And our congregation is very mobile. They're all over the place, traveling and in school, and doing all kinds of things. And one of the things we've been inviting them to do is share pictures of where they've been and what they're doing. So we have these segments where we just put pictures up and say, "Oh, this family was at orientation. This family was on vacation. This family went out to dinner."

And it's amazing how much people love witnessing and seeing what others are doing that brings them joy, and the inspiration: people that have said, "Oh, I should do this with my family. I've never thought of that." So, I think this idea of being the witnesses, and not just looking for someone to witness us, I think that's a beautiful relationship that we can really think of when we think of life-giving in these tough times.

Adam: Yeah. Sing them over again to me. We have wonderful words of life. Let me more of their beauty see. Wonderful words of life. Words of life and beauty. Teach me faith and duty.