



NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

North Park Theological Seminary **SPFM 7190 What Joy Can Teach Us**

Summer Term 2025

Class meeting dates: June 5–6, 6–9pm; June 7, 9am–5pm

One credit

Instructor Information

Beth Taulman Miller

Adjunct Professor

btmiller@northpark.edu

Course Description

In what is at least a little bit humorous, Jurgen Moltmann writes: “If we really think about it, we arrive at a surprising conclusion: Christianity is a unique religion of joy.” As people of faith, we want to be joyful and would likely agree that it’s a significant goal of the spiritual life. Yet a common struggle exists to embrace joy and its formational invitations – especially when the world feels chaotic and dark. This course explores the theology of joy – as well as the brain science that suggests that joy is more than an emotion: it’s actually the “factory setting” of how God designed us. Leaning into the nuance of how sorrow and joy intertwine, we’ll explore spiritual practices that help us cultivate an abiding joy while also acknowledging our bent as humans to fear the vulnerability of doing so.

Course Objectives:

By the end of this course students will be able to:

1. Explore the theology of joy rooted in the Trinity
2. Examine the construct that joy is our “base camp”
3. Reflect on the spiritually formative invitations joy has to offer us
4. Identify and explore the vulnerability that joy can create – and the ways we inadvertently defend ourselves against it
5. Engage in spiritual practices that help us cultivate and abide in joy

Required Texts:

1. Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York: Free Press, 2010. (212 pages)
2. Moltmann, J., Wright, N.T., Thompson, Marianne, Moschella, Mary Clark, Mathewes, Charles, and Volf, Miroslav. *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. (15 pages)
3. Wilder, Jim and Hendricks, Michel. *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2020.

Additional assigned readings will be provided in Canvas:

- Brown, Brene. *Daring Greatly*, a segment of Chapter 4: “The Vulnerability Armory.” New York: Gotham Books, 2012. (15 pages)
- Thompson, Curt. *The Soul of Shame*, Chapter 3: “Joy, Shame, and the Brain.” Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015. (20 pages)
- Richard of St. Victor. *The Trinity*, Book 3, translated by Grover A. Zinn. New York: Paulist Press 1979. (3 pages)

Assessments and Grading Scale

This class is Pass/Fail based on participation and completing all course requirements. To pass, students must satisfactorily complete assignments within the allotted time frame unless they have received prior approval for an extension from the professor. If you miss more than 3 weeks of posting (which means either neglecting to post OR posting late without having requested prior approval from the professor), you will not pass this course. This includes two required sessions of spiritual direction during the time frame of the course.

Academic Honesty

In keeping with our Christian heritage and commitment, North Park is committed to the highest possible ethical and moral standards. Just as we will constantly strive to live up to these high standards, we expect our students to do the same. To that end, cheating of any sort will not be tolerated. Students who are discovered cheating are subject to discipline up to and including failure of a course and expulsion. Our definition of cheating includes but is not limited to:

1. Plagiarism – the use of another’s work as one’s own without giving credit to the individual. This includes using materials from the internet.
2. Copying another’s answers on an examination.
3. Deliberately allowing another to copy one’s answers or work.
4. Signing an attendance roster for another who is not present.
5. Use of ChatGPT or other AI composition software to impersonate individual assignments.

For further information, see the Seminary Academic Catalog.

Accommodations

Your experience in this class is important to me. North Park is committed to creating inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law. If you have already established your accommodations, please share your accommodation letter with me so we can discuss how your accommodations will be implemented in this course. If you have not yet established services and have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations, please email the Disability Access Specialist or contact by phone (773-244 5737). Student Engagement facilitates the interactive process that establishes reasonable accommodations.

Title IX

Students who believe they have been harassed, discriminated against, or involved in sexual violence should contact the Seminary Dean of Students and Community Life ((773) 244-6222) or Dean of Students (773-244-5565) or Director of Human Resources (773-244-5599) for information about campus resources and support services, including confidential counseling services.

As a member of the North Park faculty, we are concerned about the well-being and development of our students, and are available to discuss any concerns. Faculty members are legally obligated to share information with the University’s Title IX coordinator in certain situations help ensure that the

student's safety and welfare is being addressed, consistent with the requirements of the law. These disclosures include but are not limited to reports of sexual assault, relational/domestic violence, and stalking.

Please refer to North Park's Safe Community site for contact information and further details.
<http://www.northpark.edu/Campus-Life-and-Services/Safe-Community>

Assessments

The requirements for each week are explained below. Please note that the majority of the reading is towards the front end of the class because the scheduled times for the class to meet fall in the earlier part of the semester

Class attendance and promptness as well as active participation in discussion are normative expectations. You must attend the entirety of the days your class meets to earn the grade of Pass.

1. Each week has assignments for reading, posting, viewing, and/or journaling. The journaling will never be viewed by anyone but you. However, it's expected that your journal reflections will be drawn upon as you write your final reflective paper.
2. Confidentiality: a signed "NPTS Confidentiality Statement" must be on file. This form will be provided. Discussion in class and group is protected under this statement.
3. Requirements due AFTER the final Zoom session (**which meets on Tuesday July 1 from 7-9:00pm Central Time**) and the assignments for week 7.

A. Final Integrative Paper: Due July 8, 2024

In 5 pages (12 font, double spaced) write an integrative paper using required readings/viewings, class discussions and experiences from the class, and your journal entries written during class. All quotes by authors, the instructor and the Bible must be noted and cited (see below in Submission Details). Please note your journal entries with the date they were first written with a footnote or parenthetically. Use the following as a guide to your writing:

- The class is organized around various themes of exploring joy: various definitions of joy, the theology of joy, the brain science of it, the construct of joy as "base camp", the necessity of practicing gratitude as we seek to ground into joy, thoughts around the *vulnerability* of joy and how we "protect" ourselves from it, and various tools to strengthen our practice of joy. Discuss which of these themes you found most relevant to you personally and why.
- In various ways we discussed the belief that sorrow and joy are intertwined. How are you learning to navigate the tension of those seemingly opposite things?
- Describe your experience of engaging perspectives different than your own within the class and any ways this influenced your experience of God. Here you will integrate readings, discussions, and class experiences.
- Describe a new way (or ways) you might practice joy.
- Describe any questions raised during the class which you continue to ponder.
- Cite all direct and indirect references used in your paper including your personal journal notes taken throughout during the class.

B. Two sessions of Spiritual Direction

- a. Each student will participate in two sessions with your seminary spiritual director. This is the person with whom you met in Vocational Excellence. You are responsible for contacting your director and scheduling those sessions. Spiritual Direction is commonly a monthly meeting. Please keep this in mind when scheduling. These sessions must be completed by **July 15**.
- b. If you have yet to complete Vocational Excellence and have not been assigned a spiritual director, contact Sue Braun suebraun4@gmail.com who will help connect you to a director.
- c. If it seems appropriate, use these sessions to explore what joy is teaching you in your own life.
- d. Report on completion no later than **July 15** to instructor.

Submission Details for Integrative Reflection paper:

- SAVE as: LastNameFirstName 7190 (ex.SmithKiera7190)
- Send as a WORD doc.
- Use Spell Check. Do not submit with colored markings from an uncorrected document.
- Use parenthetical referencing: Speaker: (Thompson, April 10, 2020); Book: (Thompson, 2015, 37)
- Submit paper to btmiller@northpark.edu

Confidentiality

This is a spiritual formation course, and all personal information shared in class discussion is confidential and should not be shared with anyone. Students who have not done so for prior NPTS spiritual formation classes should read and sign the confidentiality agreement.

Course Schedule

Week 1 – May 19-24: A Theology of Joy

- **Read:** The essay “Christianity: A Religion of Joy” by Jurgen Moltmann, found in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, pages 1-15,
- **Read:** *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* by Gregory Boyle, pages 1-108 (**first four chapters**)
- **Post** your response to the following two-part question by Thursday: *What from the Moltmann essay resonated with you or stirred curiosity?* and B) *What from **Tattoos on the Heart** brought you joy or made you laugh?* **Respond** to a classmate by Saturday.
- **Connect:** Email me at btmiller@northpark.edu to set up a time for us to meet via Zoom for 15-20 minutes *next* week. Slots are available **Wednesday 5/21 from 2-4pm CST** and **Thursday 5/22m CST 9-noon**. Let me know what day/time frame would work for you. I’ll look forward to meeting each of you before we gather in person in June.
- **Schedule:** Be sure and schedule your two sessions of spiritual direction that need completed by July 15th. If you do not have a spiritual director, email Sue Braun at

suebraun4@gmail.com. Hop on this quickly since this is a shorter term. These sessions are a requirement to pass this class.

Week 2: May 26-May 31: Joy as Base Camp

- **Read** – *The Other Half of Church* by Jim Wilder and Michel Henriks, pages 11-105
- **Post** your response to the following by Thursday: *What concepts/paradigms are you percolating on from The Other Half of Church? What's standing out to you?* **Respond** to a classmate by **Saturday**.
- **Write**: a 300-word (no more) personal narrative about a gratitude memory from your own life story to be shared in listening groups during class, responding to the prompt below. Sharing these narratives will be part of our class time next week. This is adapted from Appendix B of *The Other Half of Church*:
 - A. Think of a memory in your life for which you are grateful. It can be significant (the birth of a child) or small (a beautiful sunset). It doesn't matter, as long as you feel gratitude when you think about it.
 - B. Give it a two-to three-word title (for example, "Dan and Laura," "Feet in Creek," or "Balloon Soccer).
 - C. In a quiet place, go back into this memory and relive and relish it for a few minutes, like you are back in it.
 - D. Ask:
 - What did you feel in your body? Maybe "peace" or "lightness" (it doesn't matter what you feel as long as you feel something in your body).
 - What might God be communicating to you through the memory and the peace you feel? (For example: God is with me and like to share God's beauty with me or Earth is crammed with heaven, etc).
 - E. Then write 300 words (no more), describing the memory of gratitude and your response to the two questions above.
- **Connect** – if you haven't already, set up a time for us to have a 15 minute 1x1 this Wednesday 5/21 or Thursday 5/22 by emailing me at btmiller@northpark.edu.
- **Report** to me via email who your spiritual director will be and when you'll meet (or you can tell me when we meet).

Week 3 – June 2-7

- **Attend** class on **Thursday 6/5 from 6-9pm; Friday 6/6 from 6-9pm and Saturday 6/7 from 9-5pm**
- Bring with you your copies of all texts and your personal narrative of a gratitude memory

Week 4: June 9-14: The Intersection of Joy and Shame

- **Read**: *The Soul of Shame*, Chapter 3: "Joy, Shame, and the Brain," pages 57-77.
- **Watch**: Season 5, Episode 4 of the **Being Known** podcast, "**Joy, Shame and the Brain**" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz5sDEhby18>

- **Post your response to the following by Thursday.** *What stood out to you about this material? What surprised you? Why do you suppose it's important to discuss the intersection of shame and joy?* Post your response to a classmate by Saturday.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Praying with your gratitude memories as described in Appendix B, *The Other Half of Church*

Week 5 – June 16-21:

“For God to be Joy, God has to Be Three”

- **Watch** A short video on God as Relationship with Richard Rohr (about 4 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvtnoDQXBYw&list=PLyb97tZe9a1R69mMKLxqMQQcgWqDRqRLO&index=5>
- **Read:** The Trinity, Book 3, Richard of St. Victor, trans. Grover A. Zinn (Paulist Press 1979), pages 387-389. *Link will be embedded.*
- **Read this Daily meditation from The Center for Contemplation and Action**
<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/god-as-friendship-2021-04-16/>
- **Post:** How does Richard of St. Victor's theology of the Trinity influence your understanding of joy?
- **Spiritual Practice:** Praying with your gratitude memories as described in Appendix B, *The Other Half of Church*

Week 6 – June 23-27:

The Symbiotic Relationship Between Sorrow and Joy

- **Listen to the following podcast:** Ross Gay on Inciting Joy on the “It’s Been a Minute” Podcast (about 20 minutes). <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/21/1158481154/ross-gay-on-inciting-joy-while-dining-with-sorrow>
- **Read** the poem “On Joy and Sorrow” by the Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran and <https://poets.org/poem/joy-and-sorrow> and **Psalms 30:1-5** using the Lectio Divina format. If possible – pray with one on one day and the other, a different day:
 - a. Read the poem/passage through once, soaking in the words. Take some time to rest in silence.
 - b. Read the poem/passage a second time, noticing what word or phrase is standing out to you. Sit in silence.
 - c. Read the poem/passage a third time. Is there a holy whisper or invitation in these words for you? Wait in silence.
 - d. Read the poem/passage a fourth time. Is there a way you want to respond to that holy whisper or invitation? What do you notice in you as you sit in silence.
- **Post** by Thursday: Describe your understanding of the symbiotic relationship between sorrow and joy. Respond to a classmate by Saturday.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Praying with your gratitude memories as described in Appendix B, *The Other Half of Church*

Week 7- June 30-July 5: Leading and Living out of Joy

- **Read:** The second half of *Tattoos on the Heart* (page 109-212)
- **Post** by Thursday: What from *Tattoos on the Heart* do you want to take with you into the way you lead? Into the way you live? Respond to a classmate by Saturday.
- **Attend** the final night of class, Tuesday July 1 via Zoom from 7-9pm Central Time.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Praying with your gratitude memories as described in Appendix B, *The Other Half of Church*

Week 8: July 7-11

Final paper due **Tuesday July 8th**.

At the beginning of the syllabus are the requirements for the final integration paper. A few other guidelines:

Reflection papers should be a dialogue between you and the class material, not a report. Discuss the thoughts and feelings that this material evokes as well as any issues that it raises for you personally.

Talking about issues for people in general or seminary students in particular is not appropriate for an integrative reflection. Rather you should reflect on your own personal experience as your life has interfaced with the material of class this semester. One way to tell that you are doing this is your use of pronouns. A reflection paper should use “I” language rather than talk about others. The bottom line for this paper: Drawing from the content and experiences in this class, what are you coming to see that loss can teach you?