



Sermon: May 17, 2009 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Scripture: John 15:9-17, Psalm 98

Sermon Title: "A Joy that is Complete"

Now here is my question: How can someone who knows that he on the way to a date with the executioner be filled with joy?

Webster says that joy is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires."

But here is Jesus, instructing his disciples concerning the essentials that they will need in order to persevere after he has been executed. What Jesus did for those disciples, and for us, I might add, is to change the framework within which we view and experience life.

Life hasn't changed much since the beginning of civilization. All humans, of every age and generation have looked to the world about them to provide "well-being, success and good fortune," as Webster puts it.

The earliest generations of mankind looked to creation for food and shelter. Life was rustic and difficult. The basics consisted of those things which made it possible to live and spawn the next generation. With each successive generation, well-being and success were redefined to include additional extras. And these extras soon became essential to success and well-being.

Early nomadic tribes carried their tents and cooking pots on beasts of burden, horses, camels, oxen, llamas, donkeys.... Whatever they could strap their belonging onto as they moved from one territory to another. The American Indian learned to extend two poles behind the horse and now they could carry more goods. I can remember back in the 1950's when I went to scout camp over in West Virginia, there was a mountain family that went to town every Saturday on a wooden drag pulled by a horse. Two large logs with a platform strapped to the top. And we would see this mountain farmer with his wife and six children headed off to the little store in Gore, W.VA. a distance of about 12 miles. That farmer saw himself as successful because he owned a strong horse.

Somewhere along the way, someone figured out how to attach two wheels to those stout poles and made a wagon that rolled along at a faster clip and could carry much more weight. Settlers headed west across the great American expanse had a great array of goods and necessities they carried with them. The Conestoga wagon with a team of six oxen could carry a lot.

Is it any wonder that success and well-being came to be measured in terms of what you owned, and who you were depended upon the amount of land and extras you were able to

gather about yourself. Oh the joy of sitting on the front porch and watching the crops grow, of being able to sit down to dinner and eat off of fine china and drink out of crystal glasses.

In Jesus' time, success and well-being was measured in more rustic terms than it is today, but still joy came from the things you amassed and the position you held. Those disciples came out of that culture. A boat load of fish to sell at the market meant a great deal to the families of the men who went out on the sea of Galilee each day. Joy was linked to things and position and wealth and public recognition. It was for those disciples and it still is today.

But, along comes One who turns everything upside down. The framework within which those disciples had lived was challenged by a simple Galilean carpenter. And here is the important thing to remember. Jesus did not say forget about your wealth and goods. He did not preach a message of pauperism. You don't find joy by rejecting this world's gifts and benefits. True Joy is found in an entirely different realm... in the realm of relationships.

If you and I go home this afternoon and pull out all the clothes in our closets and take them down to Good Will, keeping a bare minimum for our own needs. That may not bring us certain Joy. We'll feel good about what we've done, perhaps. Perhaps not. Joy comes when we interact with others in such a way that they trust us and we trust them. Joy comes when we are able to interact with neighbors, friends and family even strangers in such a way that those others are lifted above the attachments to things and given a new understanding of life that is whole and complete.

Isn't that what Jesus did with his twelve most trusted disciples? They received a new and exciting way of viewing the world. Oh, they didn't fully understand it at first. They grew into this Joy. They learned from The Master what life was all about. Not things, but relationships. Listen as Jesus instructs them:

***As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.***

Love is a relationship word. Isn't it a shame we use the word "Love" to indicate the feeling we have toward our car or truck. Your cute little sport convertible cannot "love" you back. There is no real relationship there. It's a one-sided affair. You stop putting gas in the tank and just see how far it will go for you.

***Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.***

There are commitments and obligations to Love. Real Joy comes when folks meet their obligations, when commitments grow and expand, when relationships develop that go beyond the simple "pro quid pro". You know that phrase do you not. It means, "I'll get mine, you get yours." Or, even better, "I'll get mine only if you get yours." And that is no basis for a relationship. Jesus tells his disciples that because He has obeyed His

Father's commands, they have a new relationship upon which to base their lives. And because of this new relationship "their joy may be complete."

***I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.***

Is there anyone here this morning who does not want to experience complete joy? Oh, I know; every now and then you run across someone who cannot smile, who never has a good word to say, who always seems as if they are doomed to a life of boredom and insignificance. You try to joke with them, you try to pep them up, you attempt to lift their spirits, but nothing works. For some reason they have decided that there is no joy to be had in their lives. And your attempts to rescue them from their doldrums only works to convince them that life is joyless. These folks do not make good greeters at the door of the church. But Jesus, who has every reason to be down and depressed, knowing that he is headed for his own demise, tells his disciples that he is filled with joy and he wants these disciples to catch the spirit of that joy to such a degree that they will become totally and completely captured by this Joy.

But you say to yourselves, "How in the world can we be joyful? Everything in the world is pointing us in the other direction, away from joy. Look at the condition of the world today. Wars on practically every continent: Africa, Asia, Central America; South America; Indonesia. Look at the effects of the economic downturn. Have you checked your retirement accounts lately? Do you know a family that has had to move out of their home, or is holding on by a thread? How do we do it, Jesus? How do we allow the Joy that you are feeling, become a part of us?"

My friends in Christ, I know this is going to sound a bit trite.... But the answer is found in a single word. LOVE. Listen to Jesus as he instructs his disciples... and remember that as he is speaking he is completely aware of the fact that his days are numbered.

***My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.***

When you read this passage in Greek, the word that is used over and over again for our English word: Love is AGAPE. This is not your ordinary human love that exists between "lovers". This is not the everyday human love that exists between a parent and their children. This is AGAPE, self giving love. Sacrificial love. The kind of love that would compel a GI to throw himself on a handgranade to save the lives of his brothers in their foxhole. This is the kind of love that would compel a woman to give a kidney to her sister because her sister's kidneys have ceased functioning. This is the kind of love that compel a couple to open their home and their hearts to an orphan from another country and adopt that child as their own. And yes, there have been millions of times when Christians have sacrificed their lives simply because Jesus said: Love each other as I have loved you. And we all know the extent of the love which Christ exhibited.

Thankfully you and I are rarely called upon to be examples of this extreme love. But we can capture the essence of that love when we love sacrificially.

Can you remember the turmoil of the 60's and 70's over the issue of civil rights? I can! Some died because the love of Christ compelled them to march for the rights of all Americans. And those who did not die, felt billy sticks on their heads, and spent nights in jails. And many who openly expressed their belief in the rights of all Americans learned later that employment opportunities were closed to them, and in some cases families rejected them because the Love of Christ compelled them to act out Christ's Love.

There is something very compelling about this AGAPE love. Often it goes against the grain of the times. Often it challenges the beliefs of the day. Often it grabs hold of us when we least expect it.

This past week on Good Morning America the story was told of two women born on the same day in the same hospital 52 years ago. Somehow these two little babies were switched. Each mother went home with the other mother's baby. For 52 years these women were raised by the wrong parents. Then one day a neighbor said to one of the women, "I saw a woman the other day who could be your twin." The neighbor got the two women together and they were almost identical twins, simply born in different years. A DNA test proved that there had been a switch. What a disaster! Can you imagine the anger and hurt... the feelings of betrayal? But no, the two women who were switched simply looked at each other and said, "I guess we are one big family now, and they and their children and their grandchildren formed a new extended family, joyful that they now had cousins that they never dreamed of before. AGAPE love works like that. Instead of looking at the mistake and the injustice, they looked at the possibilities and the Joy of embracing a larger family.

Well now. What is the outcome, if we are able to express this AGAPE love? What are the results of loving others as Christ loved us? Jesus summed it up this way:

***You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.... Fruit that will last.***

We will become fruitful. There is no way under God's creation that you and I can be filled with Joy and Love and not share it with others. Don't come into this sanctuary and expect to be entertained and enthralled, inspired and uplifted and then go back out into the world and revert to the everyday humdrum of life. If the love of God grabs you in here, let it move you out there. Let folks see it on your face. Let folks experience it in your actions. Let folks know that it is not your Joy, but Christ's that is simply reflecting through you. That is complete joy! Then, when you ask God for anything in the name of Jesus, you will receive it..... because AGAPE love will change what you ask for.

Jesus finished his lesson to his disciples by repeating the heart of the message:

***This is my command: love each other.!***

I submit to you that you cannot be a loving, caring community without letting that love overflow to all the world about you. And furthermore, I submit that it is this Love of Christ which we model that will draw more folks into the ministry of this congregation than all the threats of Hell and condemnation of Hellfire. Amen.

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