



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER — MAY 6, 2018
ACTS 10:44-48; PSALM 98:1-9; 1 JOHN 5:1-6; JOHN 15:9-17

ABIDE IN JOY

JOHN 15:9-17: [Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”]

I have never spoken in tongues like the Gentiles in today’s reading. I may have been unintelligible sometimes – hopefully not this morning – but tongues, not so much. But I have had joy and praise burst from my lips.

Not in church, of course. Right? For goodness sake. There are no rubrics in the Prayer Book that say, “make loud expression of joy right here.”

But at ball games, yeah, baby! When my goalie daughter caught that water polo ball and threw it the whole length down the pool with her mighty arm and we scored, I’m the one jumping up and down screaming, “Go! Go! Go! Woo Hoo! Kelsey Herrmann you rock!”

She did not like me to call her by name out loud at her games. That was our agreement. But when the joy overtook me, I hollered it out.

The Spirit of Joy! When it overcomes you, it bursts out.

Like today’s Psalm: Shout with joy all you lands! Let the rivers clap their hands!

The Gospel of John that we read may seem quieter, but it’s the same Spirit of joy. “That your joy may be *complete*,” Jesus says. Could it be any bigger? The Gospel of John is written in a very particular style, with long sentences and repetitions, presenting Jesus in a studied kind of way. Not bite-sized parables, but long

discourses. Clement of Alexandria, one of the earliest commentators, (late second century – ca. CE 150-215) referred to John’s Gospel as a “spiritual gospel.” But when Jesus said the things he said, he was a PERSON, with a voice, and energy, and charisma, and humor, and suffering, and JOY. Like you and me.

And I know what you’re thinking – because I’m thinking it, too. We’re thinking, well, not *really* like me. I’m not God.

But here’s the good news in today’s Gospel. Listen to Jesus again. He says:

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

I hear three words to overcome you: ABIDE, JOY, and LOVE. And they are absolutely synonyms here.

Jesus and the Father abide in each other, are one with each other, and so abide in mutual love – and that is the completeness of joy. In today’s Gospel, it is into *that* joy that Jesus invites his disciples – US – into, to abide in his love in that same way. Jesus loves us as wholly, purely, deeply as the Father loves him. When we abide in that love, that is how our joy may be complete!

So, in this context, what do we mean by “joy?” It’s the same as understanding what we mean by “abide.” In the Greek, *meno* (μένω) means to remain, to endure, a continuous, ongoing state, not a singular moment or an ephemeral

experience. The glorious gift is that the very abiding IS the joy. One and the same.

Christians throughout the centuries have explored and dug deeply into this abiding. Like St. Benedict. If you’re reading Esther de Waal’s book *Seeking God* this season, you see that one of the tenets of the Benedictine way of life was, and is, stability. De Waal writes that “stability, from the Latin word meaning to stand, means staying still, remaining firm, not necessarily in a geographic sense, but in the more fundamental sense of the interior holding for the long haul.”¹ Jesus gives us that gift, to stand on the solid ground of our interior holding stable in his love, so that whatever we are facing, our core holds, we are always home where he abides in us and we in him, no matter the place or the circumstances.

We, for our part, hold that space by abiding in the Lord in prayer, and by loving each other, from that core place of love, where we are all one. That is our completeness of joy.

Does that sound maybe like a lot of lovey-dovey baloney?

The acclaimed preacher and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote: “[But] what of joy? It sadly never seems to be on the top of the list of what it means to be God’s people. And it’s definitely not what Christians are known for. Any guess on what *is* the top adjective used to describe Christians? *Judgmental*. I think maybe that’s because human religion so easily becomes more about knowing right from wrong than knowing God.”²

Well, we have all experienced that, some in very hurtful, downright harmful ways. But

folks will say, “Jesus does say, ‘If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.’ So isn’t that about knowing right and wrong?”

Not in this Gospel. Again, listen to what Jesus says. He tells us exactly what his commandment is: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

What did that mean for Peter and the circumcised believers who were with him in today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles? Well, the Scripture says they “were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” They were astounded by the open bounty of the gift of the Spirit bursting forth, for everyone, even the non-Jews, the unclean people! But Peter recognizes the oneness in the Spirit. He says, “Well, can anyone withhold the water of baptism from the people when the Spirit has obviously been poured on them?” Heck, no! There is no withholding – not even for US. There is the joy again.

Now, I tell you, I know it’s dicey to preach about joy. Because I know that every one of us has scars, and many of you sitting here today are carrying heavy burdens that are far from joyful. And I don’t propose a pop theology that says, “God makes it all good.” It’s not that easy. Some things are NOT good. And in today’s world and in a nation whose hateful and unjust underbelly of not loving one another is increasingly becoming its face, how do you authentically preach JOY? How do we actually abide in this completeness of joy that Jesus is talking about?

Well, we’ve all been around enough to know that joy is different from, and deeper than, happiness; it has to do with recognizing something deep in our core. It is not circumstantial; it is absolutely *existential*. Joy is the fundamental state of our being as God’s children, the abiding in Jesus that makes us all one. It is something inside of us responding to something inside of every other person, abounding in creation – that we are one in Spirit and God is transforming us to recognize the realness of this abiding, and then to live it out.

We are in the Easter season, the season of resurrection, and we’ve been reading the Acts of the Apostles for six weeks now – and they’ve been on fire with the Spirit. They are one, they are abiding, and what that looks like has been they’re sharing their possessions in a common purse, they’re healing people in Jesus’ name and calling out for repentance, they’re talking back to the high priest himself, they’re running after a chariot to explain the Scriptures to the Ethiopian, they’re baptizing Gentiles and not censuring them for speaking out of turn in tongues. Resurrection has transformed them, filled their hearts with a joy that cannot be contained – and it expresses itself in going out into the world abiding in Jesus by recognizing Him in everyone, and sharing the good news. That stable well-spring within of abiding in Christ takes us out into the world to do the work of radical love.

That work is the wellspring of the joy. It may not be happy all the time, but that inner grounding in Christ’s radical love is the locus of our joy as Christians.

In the Dalai Lama's and Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *Book of Joy*, it says, "What does our happiness have to do with addressing the suffering of the world? It is a virtuous cycle. The more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience, and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others. The goal is not just to create joy for ourselves, but [as the Archbishop poetically phrased it] 'to be a reservoir of joy, an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you.'"³

Joy is the emotion of resurrection! It is our grounding. When we sense it deep in ourselves, when we listen for it, seek it, bathe in it, believe in it, that is when we are transformed, when we are truly resurrection people, when our joy is complete.

Don't skim over these Gospel words today. Jesus says to me, and to you – to every one of

us: "I chose you." Jesus CHOSE you. Whether our circumstances are a happy time in our lives, or a difficult time in our lives, Jesus is in it with us. We abide in him and he in all of us. We are not alone; we are one.

Let THAT joy bubble up. In any language; in every language. Or in the quiet grounding of your heart, where Jesus loves us, abides in us and we in him.

And in the midst of your happiest moments, and even on your worst day, may your joy be complete in Christ.

¹de Waal, Esther, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984, p. 12.

²Bolz-Weber, Nadia, "Joyless Christians and the Lord of the Rings," *Sojourners*, July 7, 2011. Accessed May 3, 2018 at: <https://sojo.net/articles/joyless-christians-and-lord-rings>

³Tutu, Desmond and Dalai Lama, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, New York, NY: Avery Publishers, 2016, p. 63.



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