

“Complete Joy”

Psalm 98; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

May 6, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Today’s Gospel comes from just one conversation that Jesus had with his disciples the night before his death. That conversation was so important to the Gospel writer John that nearly ¼ of the entire Gospel – five chapters out of 21 – record it. The portion of that conversation that I want to focus on this morning is a single verse: *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* (vs. 11)

Complete joy. Today Jesus offers us complete joy. What is it; how do we get it; and what do we do once we have it?

Sometimes finding joy in our lives is elusive and so we are startled when it appears: as startling as singing “Joy to the World” in the merry, merry month of May. Lest it be thought that the pastor is retiring because he has lost his mind – though certainly that case can be made – it is worth noting that Christmas – with which we so closely associate this hymn – is not mentioned in it at all. The hymn is based on Psalm 98 and our surprise at singing it near the end of Eastertide is one example of how we are sometimes not prepared for joy because of preconceived notions or low or despondent expectations. “Joy to the World” in May? Why not?

Would that it was only negative attitudes that cause us to be startled when joy appears. More substantive reasons abound: fear for our livelihoods in the face of down-sizing, layoffs, or working longer hours for less compensation. Victimization by violence in its many forms. The death of a loved one has broken our hearts and spirits. Maybe it’s just that life is going “okay,” with the emphasis on the “going:” going, going, going nearly out of our minds with activity.

As Carol and I traveled the Canadian west for the last 13 days, 11 of those days were spent living out of this suitcase and this backpack for me; and similar-sized luggage for her. Henry David Thoreau's mantra "Simplify, simplify, simplify" rang in my ears, but often we can hardly hear it above the din of our self-imposed frenzy of activity and acquisition.

Still, Jesus assures his disciples and us "*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*" In the original New Testament Greek, the word "complete" is "pleroo" (play-ro-o), which can be translated "full" (KJV). The concepts of being satisfied and having accomplished something are all reflected in this word. So, to answer the first of my three opening questions – "What is this joy of which Jesus speaks?" – the word Jesus uses may include emotional excitement but seems more to point to quiet contentment. It is the sort of quiet joy that comes when we see that glorious sunrise or sunset, when its beauty took our breath away and we realized we didn't do anything to make it happen but only watched and marveled at it. It is that joy that catches us and somehow transports us beyond ourselves.

So how do we get it? That was my second question. The answer, as I see it, is as much a confession for this preacher as anything else. For you see, we do not get it. It gets us. This joy is one of those elusive things that the more you seek to grasp and obtain it, the less likely it will be that you will. For those of us who are action-minded, this complete joy that Jesus offers provokes us to stop...to listen for the "still, small voice," and to remember that a very busy Jesus made sure he took time away and time to pray.

And if we must "do" something, it is to keep his commandments and abide in his love. These are the things he tells the disciples to do so that "*my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.*"

The curious thing about all of this is that the joy we yearn for comes from being transported beyond the moment to something greater than oneself. We've heard much about the opioid crisis. While certainly some physicians oversubscribe and some patients become "hooked" accidentally, the crisis also reflects our search to manufacture joy through artificial means by choosing to abuse opioid use. The push to legalize marijuana for recreational use in those states that have done so may or may not eliminate a black market; may or may not reduce crime; and may or may not generate tax revenue in excess of the social cost of making it easier to become intoxicated. The point is that substance use and abuse is a temporary and shadowy substitute for the complete joy Jesus offers, and it will never fill the hole in our heart. Never. Ever.

Then what, pastor? Again, the joy we yearn for comes from being transported beyond the moment to something greater than oneself. It is not about doing one more thing, although sometimes it is about ceasing one or more things so that we can do something more important. That most important thing is love, both inward and outward.

Inwardly, it is to stop. To breathe. To remember that for God's sake – literally, for God's sake – to remember that God has chosen you and me and loves us and that we are not isolated and alone but connected with one another through Jesus Christ. We are to "waste" time with Jesus. Remembering and reconnecting is "wasting time" in the most holy sense. That's what we do when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. We remember and reconnect with the vine from which all life comes. We "waste" time so that we reconnect with the complete joy that is not dependent on circumstances but on grace. We renew the complete joy that brings peace and rest in the midst of life's frantic pace. This is the inward impulse of love.

And then we love outwardly. We go out to fulfill the commandment to love. Loving one another brings contentment and joy by living in the Lord. This afternoon, as many of us as can will go to hear our bishop speak of the work of “The Way Forward” Commission. This commission has been looking at the rules of our church that discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation. I cannot, for the life of me, understand the people who did not choose their own sexual orientation any more than they chose the color of their eyes or skin or the shape of their fingerprints; and yet would discriminate against others who also did not choose their orientation and want nothing other than to love the Lord; to marry; and, if God so calls, respond with a decision to seek ordination. “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus says to his people then and now.

Such loves gives for the sake of others, as so many of you know through the many ministries of which you are a part through and beyond this church. This giving love brings an inner joy that cannot be bought, stolen, traded for or manufactured. Loving one another is the root of the declaration “Joy to the World, the Lord is come.”

I mentioned before that this hymn is associated with Christmas by its use but that its words are from Psalm 98. So as we consider what we might do differently in our lives to experience the complete joy Jesus promises, I want to do something different with this hymn. I want us to sing it again – just the first verse – but slowly, as a prayer. We’re going to do this a capella – without accompaniment – with no disrespect to Maestro but so that we can hear one another. Maybe, as we slow the hymn down, we may make room for the complete joy that allows us to love one another. Every one. No exceptions.

*“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.”*