

Complete Joy

By
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from the pulpit of
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1 John 4:15-21

¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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.

¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Jim Carter, who so ably served this church as the Interim Pastor before I came, was passing through town a while back. We had lunch together, and he gave me a delightful book of essays by renown American Writer, E. B. White. Perhaps best remembered for his children's books, *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, I'm sure many of us also used his book on grammar, *The Elements of Style*, to write papers that would pass the mark in high school or college. E.B. White had a winsome, quick-witted way of capturing ordinary moments in everyday life. In one of his essays he confessed, "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to enjoy the world and a desire to improve the world. That makes it hard to plan the day."¹

That is a tension that characterizes life – the balance between work and play, between accomplishing a task or doing something just for the fun of it, between having a meaningful purpose for the hour or just savoring the goodness of creation, the difference between asking ourselves "What do I have to do?" and "What would I like to do?" A full and abundant life, the kind of life God intends for us, includes both, of course, but trying to find a balance - day in and day out – between meaningful work and simple, grateful contentment can be a challenge. Indeed, it makes it hard to plan the day.

When I was studying this passage of scripture, long before I turned to commentaries and considered what theologians and biblical scholars said about its meaning, this one particular verse kept pulling me toward it, almost like a magnet: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete." "Complete joy." I started thinking about the rhythm of my days and where I might have described myself as being in a state of "complete joy."

You can imagine what a pastor's life is like. Just this week I walked a mile up and down hospital corridors and across a cemetery to a freshly dug grave to celebrate a long and remarkable life. With newly ordained

¹ *Christian Century*, March 7, 2012, p. 30.

and installed lay leadership, I busied myself with multiple calls about Council assignments, scheduled meetings and attended more than a few meetings myself. We celebrated the opening of Surrey Services on our campus. I also took a moment to marvel at a bird flying in and out of the bluebird box in the center of our back yard, but curiously, year after year, none of the birds who nest in our bluebird box is blue. In these ordinary weekly rhythms, from prayers said over saints on your behalf to routine meetings to a bit of awe before a natural wonder, was there joy? Absolutely. Was there complete Joy? I need these words of Jesus to help me figure that out.

If *complete* means having all the necessary elements together; and *joy* is that emotion evoked by well-being and a source of delight –where do we find *complete joy*? Complete joy amid the to-do lists at work and home: keeping up with folks going through tough times, attending to schedules and negotiating interruptions, showing up at command performances, getting things done that need to be done and basking in the sheer goodness of life? Where is *complete joy* if you keep your eyes open to what is going on in our world – of seemingly endless warfare, whole populations oppressed by famine and disease, poverty and political corruption, colleges and universities in an uproar for change, for peace, and generally for good reason. How on earth, does Jesus expect us to trust his promise to have complete joy? Jesus gives us a commandment to love, a model for loving the world, and an image that helps us be on the lookout for joy every day – even within the chaotic rhythm of our lives.

Complete joy – it turns out - may be quite different from what I thought at first. Remember how this passage of scripture began in our reading last week: “I am the Vine, you are the branches.” Stay securely connected to me, Jesus says, and through me to one another, and your joy will be complete... come what may. In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are concentrated. The closer we stay to the Vine, connected to the abiding love of Christ himself, the more fruitful our discipleship will be,

and the more complete our joy will be.

Now, three things can be said about what the Bible means by joy. The first is that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness tends to come when things are going our way, and can fade when circumstances change. Real joy is not dependent upon something happening or not happening, but arises out of a deep feeling of confidence in God. Christian Joy believes that God can be trusted. The second thing that can be said about joy is that it is not a private commodity. While joy may be experienced as a very private and intimate emotion, almost beyond words to describe, the biblical notion of joy depends upon relationships. God created us for community. God created us to live and thrive within families and friendships. That's why in today's reading, Jesus calls us friends. From his resurrection a community grew that transcends biological relationships to create a great gathering of friends. We weep with those who weep, and we rejoice with those who rejoice; we never experience the full joy God intends - in isolation. The third thing to say is that human joy is grounded in the joy of creation. In the Bible, the trees clap their hands, mountains skip like young rams, and the morning stars sing together. "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!" summons us to praise along with the drumbeat of insects, the anthems of birds, the roaring thunder of the seas. Biblical joy is deeper than happiness, never private, and celebrates life amid a vast, wondrous creation.²

William and Mary humanities professor, Adam Potkay, wrote a book called *The Story of Joy* which is a study from the Bible through late Romantic literature. He argues that joy is not only a human capacity but also integral to our well-being. Medical science has shown that joyful people are inclined to be healthier. Joyful laughter stimulates the brain to produce endorphins and can be used successfully to treat pain disorders. And, Potkay adds, joy must be shared to be fully experienced.³

² Nancy Blakely, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 472.

³ Potkay cited by John Buchanan, "Rejoicing" Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, 12/13/09.

This is what Jesus is telling his disciples to prepare them for resurrection faith. We are united in Christ's life with a common purpose to love as we have been loved, and to live according to Jesus commandment to love. We know what that looks like extending hospitality to the stranger, serving the poor, visiting the sick, caring for those in need, making peace and working for justice. The way of life which leads to complete joy is a commitment to the work of Christ, extending the love of God that abides in us, and comes alive through our service to others.

Ross Gay is a former college football star, a gardener and a writer who teaches English at Indiana University. His recently published books include a collection of poetry on gratitude and a book of essays on delight. He is an academic who studies the possibility of joy through difficulty and trauma. His work is an outgrowth of a complicated life as a bi-racial child of a mixed-race couple who got married in the era of Loving vs. Virginia, back when some state laws forbid such unions. Curious about how difficult his parent's mixed-race marriage was, he learned to trace their patterns of love and joy found amid terrible racism and ostracism. Acknowledging the prevalence of his family trauma, as a black child of mixed-race parents, as well as the fraught and violent and divisive times in which we live, Krista Tippet asked Ross Gay in a recent interview: How can we possibly be joyful in a moment like this? Gay responded: "Sometimes I think there's a conception of joy as meaning something easy. To me, joy has nothing to do with ease. Joy has everything to do with the fact that we're all in the process of dying, and yet some connection is being made in my life." And I realize like that underground connection of trees in the forest, we are connected by common human experiences... Joy is made possible in the midst of difficulty when alienation from other people goes away.

Then Ross Gay tells a story about one of his students. She wanted to be a teacher, and what she wanted her classrooms to be was an experience of wilderness. His student said, "What if we joined our wildernesses together and discovered that everyone lives with some profound

personal sorrow. What if we joined our sorrows, then we would discover the sharing itself is joy.”⁴

The sharing itself is joy.” *Love one another*, Jesus said. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Love one another as I have loved you. So that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.* Joy is not the same thing as happiness. It’s meant to be shared – even amid great sorrow. It’s grounded – God’s joy is – in the creation, even in the wilderness of creation, there – shared joy - is found in love. Seems to me like that is the way to get up in the morning and plan the day.

AMEN.

⁴ On Being Krista Tippett interview of Ross Gay, 3/26/20.