

Sunday, May 5, 2024
1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17
“Choose Joy”

The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Starvation, tornadoes, flooding, prejudice, violence, injustice, Ukraine, babies dying, Gaza, sheer horror, demonstrations, riots. Some days it's just too much and I can't even turn on the news. And so you can imagine why I was really struck by Jesus' use of the word joy in our text for this morning. "I have said all these things about life and death and love so that my joy" – Jesus' joy may be in us and that our joy may be complete or full or overflowing." Complete? Overflowing? Joy? Not on all days. Not on a lot of days.

So the Gospel text from John is a continuation of last week's final words of Jesus to his disciples before he dies. And I imagine the disciples hearing these words also thought – joy? It seems wrong, after being told the one they relied on, loved, followed, belonged to, is going away, dying – "may you have joy" - but maybe that's the point. As one pastor writes, "Because where is joy in the midst of the hardship Jesus described and in the period that is sure to come? Where is joy when [we] need it the most? Jesus knows that the presence of joy needs to be heard, needs to be felt, when [we] face things that assume and anticipate a profound absence of joy." (1) So this morning let's talk about joy which really begins with the pursuit of happiness and relies on the commandment to love.

Philosophers John Locke and Adam Smith talked about the right to life and liberty and estate or property. But we know Thomas Jefferson substituted the notion of happiness for estate or property. And in our own Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote, all human beings have the inalienable absolute rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". I always found it interesting that he uses the phrase, pursuit of happiness. As if happiness is something that must be pursued. Should be pursued. It sounds opposite, shouldn't things just make us happy?

There is a Chinese Proverb that states:

If you want happiness for an hour – take a nap

If you want happiness for a day – go fishing

If you want happiness for a year – inherit a fortune

If you want happiness for a lifetime – help someone else.

It's like Jesus Sermon on the Mount when he turns the entire idea of being blessed or being happy and turns it upside down saying happiness or being blessed requires us to live and love with open-handedness towards the rest of the world. Benedictine sister Joan Chittister wrote an entire book called Happiness. She writes, "Happiness is not a fancy, not a notion, not an illusion, not the produce of charlatans and rogues to keep us buying potions of nothingness. Happiness is itself both a sign and a measure of human development. It can't be 'gotten' by luck, it can't be pursued as if it were a product of something outside of ourselves. It must be chosen and developed and cultivated. It is both in us and beyond us. It is the elixir of the spiritual life." (2)

And I think this is the same if not more so when it comes to joy. In yoga we hear the imperative phrase, "choose joy". I like that. We pursue happiness or cultivate it, and we choose joy. We always have a choice on how we view a situation, an event, a person or how we react to something. There are many times in a single day we can choose joy over, say anger,

frustration, or even indifference. Joy means an intense feeling of happiness. Interesting that the Oxford, British Dictionary defines joy as a vivid emotion of pleasure or gladness, the thing that causes you delight; whereas the US Webster Dictionary defines joy as the emotion evoked by well-being, success or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires. Wow, that speaks volumes about what we perceive to be important, how we pursue happiness and define joy in this country!

If you think about it, our society spends an enormous amount of time and money on unhappiness. Not necessarily medical depression, but anxiety, sadness. Right? How to cure its pains, heal its wounds, diminish its consequences, physically and psychologically. We don't spend much time talking about how to cultivate happiness, where to find peace and joy. The reason Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him, keep these things in mind, is so that they will remember his joy when there seems to be no joy anywhere around. And the joy Jesus describes is a deep and enduring creative gladness that, even when it seems most unlikely, will inevitably come.

Interesting that the Greek words for "grace" and "joy" share the same root. As one pastor writes, joy may very well be a feeling of grace, the emotion of grace, even the response to grace. Joy is that indescribable sense when you find yourself experiencing abundant grace. In other words, joy amidst all [those horrible things I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon – war, hatred, injustice], joy amidst, "all that you can certainly name in your own life, in the life of this congregation, both communally and individually, is not an answer. It's an affirmation. It's the guarantee of God's grace when all that is good seems so far away. It's the security of God's love when it appears that love is nowhere to be felt, especially from those you thought would love you. It's the hope that even in the darkest places of separation, God's abiding and our abiding in God is promised and present." (3)

That is what Jesus meant when he told the disciples that he is the vine, and they are the branches. We all are the branches and all of us are to bear good fruit. And Jesus gets specific, you want to bear good fruit? I leave you one commandment, just one, love one another. To abide in the vine, to love God, your neighbor and yourself; there is where your joy will be complete. When you realize that the most meaningful moments in your life are all about connection to others, love of others, your view of happiness and joy changes. That is bearing good fruit.

Two weeks ago, I was in Minnesota visiting my son and his girlfriend. They have just started attending a local Presbyterian Church. On Saturday morning, like here a couple weeks ago, being Earth Day, they had their spring cleanup of the church grounds. But on Sunday, we went to church which was so fun and after worship they had an amazing potluck lunch, complete with their favorite hot dishes – they don't call them casseroles – and in their ministry of trying to meet and be a part of the neighborhood, they formed a neighborhood cleanup. Even the smallest of children, equipped with brightly colored yellow vests, badges which proudly displayed the name of the church, and garbage bags in hand, set out around the neighborhood, cleaning up and greeting people. Their motto: Don't just go to church, be the church!

And we do just that, we volunteer or donate to the Jonny Cake center, we cook for the warm shelter, we volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, we donate or help set up homes for Veterans, Refugees, we sew, we gather, we sing, we teach the children, we mentor the youth, we serve. And now, now we need to speak, we need to promote what we do here.

Bear good fruits. And it starts with putting God back into the picture, back into the conversation. To be unapologetically Christian, to learn again how to speak about our faith, to believe God is in all of this, it isn't only up to us and what we say and do. There is a belief that needs to be spoken to. We live in a world with so many "nones" those who have no idea what church is or what we believe. And yet, the search for meaning and purpose and spiritual practices leaves many with wanting something more, something greater than themselves. What we need is new eyes to see God working right here, right now and spread that word. Love God, neighbor, and self.

And in the light of Jesus' teachings, joy, is beyond our choosing and simply comes to us as a sheer gift. Jesus commands his disciples to remain with him, abide in him and his love for them. Whatever they may think, they didn't actually choose him or decide to follow him, or even consciously become his disciples. Rather, Jesus chose them. He chose them. The fact is God chose us, loves us, works through us. It's not that all of life's tragedies don't matter, but with God's love for us, we can have the courage to face these challenges and renew our strength to do something about them. It's also not about fixing the world, we can't do that, that's God's work. But hear this, God has promised to make this world a better place, God is actively working to make us and our church and our community and our world a better, more just, more kind, peaceful world. And this can give us the strength and energy to make our little corner of the world a better place.

I believe joy comes when we have achieved a life of leaving something of value behind and realizing that it is part of something much bigger than ourselves. As Sister Joan writes, it's when "We come to realize that it is not just having the children that counts; it is raising them to become a gift of new love and goodness in the world that, in the end, makes parenting the pinnacle of a person's life. It is not just to have a job that will sustain our sense of happiness in life; it's having a job that enables us to look back on life knowing that we did or the way we did it made the world a better place. It's not just being gifted or wealthy or powerful that makes a person happy, it's what we did to enrich life for everyone we touched with what we ourselves were given that allows us to heave a sigh of satisfaction as we do whatever it is we do, however stiff the course, however high the climb, however difficult the odds. Happiness [Joy] is about being more contented with what we give than with what we have." (4)

Okay, before closing this sermon I have to include a funny, touching story of joy. When Luke Epplin pictured the birth of his first child, he never imagined in a million years what would turn into what he called a weird horrific comedy/ tragedy of a day. Having not gotten much rest for an entire weekend, Luke and his wife Healy were surprised that at her routine check-up on Monday was told she needed to go directly to the hospital to induce their baby. Around 4 a.m. on Tuesday, she finally went into active labor and Luke had just fallen into a deep, deep sleep. A member of the hospital staff woke him, and he struggled to shake off the cobwebs and hold his wife and then, he just fainted. Which happens often, but when he fell, his head crashed into one of the metal legs of Healy's bed. When he regained consciousness, he was on a stretcher headed to the emergency room. After 6 staples and a tetanus shot, Luke was free to return to his wife. You have to realize they were at Manhattan General Hospital which expands an entire city block. On his way back to the maternity ward he made a wrong turn. Realizing he didn't have any identification on him, but a patient wrist tag and his head was wrapped like a World War 1 wounded soldier, he was escorted down to security. He was able to quickly show the guard his

discharge papers and was led outside. He eventually found the maternity ward and additional security guards had to make some phone calls to confirm his identity so that he could reenter the maternity ward. When he finally reached his wife's floor and thought he would have to explain himself again to another security guard, the guard interrupted him and said, "oh we know all about you." As he entered the room, his wife, said, "thank God you're here" and started to push, and a little while later, baby Ava was born. True story. And if that doesn't bring your day a little joy, stick around because the anthem will definitely bring us all joy.

Just read the meaning of the words that will be sung: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy. Most high and glorious God, illuminate the darkness of my heart, and grant an upright faith, perfect love, certain hope, profound humility, wisdom and understanding. O God, that I might follow your one and true commandment. Which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. It has been said that we are shaped and fashioned by what we love. It has been said, when we do what we love, it's not a job, it's a life. What we love, who we love, whose love is in us, is what gives life, meaning, purpose, happiness, and can make our joy complete. If only we were to choose joy, choose to love everyone. Amen.

(1) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline, "Choosing Joy", working preacher, 5/3/2015.

(2) Chittister, Sister Joan. Happiness. P. 49

(3) Lewis

(4) Chittister, p. 80.