

Sermon for Sunday, May 9, 2021 - "The Gift of Joy"

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Our Gospel reading today is part of Jesus' last words to his disciples before his death. The church returns to these words during the Easter season to reflect on them in light of the resurrection. Jesus has a lot to say. His farewell speech takes up four chapters in the gospel of John.

Today we learn one of Jesus' hopes for this long goodbye. "I have said these things to you," Jesus explains, "so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." If I was one of Jesus' first disciples, I think I would have had some questions when he started talking about joy right then. What do you mean Jesus? You've just been telling us you're going to be betrayed, tortured, and killed. The people who want to kill you probably want us dead, too. We've learned to love you and trust you and hope in you, but now you're saying goodbye, way too soon. And you're talking about joy? Come again?

Joy can seem a little inappropriate in the face of death. Joy can seem hard to access in difficult times. Yet Jesus wants his disciples, all of us, to have joy: joy in the face of death, joy amidst sorrow and fear and uncertainty, joy within us, joy that is complete. Jesus wants this for us.

And thankfully, joy does not depend upon us. It doesn't depend on whether we think it is appropriate, whether we can summon it up. Joy is a gift from God. The biblical word for joy has the same root as the word for grace. Just as grace is a free, undeserved gift not dependent on anything we do, so too is joy.

I wonder if joy is what grace feels like in our bodies. Grace is such good news, but it is kind of abstract and heady. Joy is a tangible experience of grace. I remember feeling joy again after a very difficult time in my life. My mom died suddenly in November. A few months later, we learned my dad's kidney cancer had returned. I'd been in a fog for months. I was oblivious to the start of spring that year.

And then one day, while walking to work, crab apple blossoms on a tree caught my eye. I felt joy arising from deep within me. I hadn't been paying attention. I hadn't been able to take deep breaths or meditate. I was hardly able to pray. I had done nothing to choose joy. Joy just welled up within me that day as my eyes were drawn to a glorious gift of God's creation. My shoulders felt lighter. I lifted up my head and noticed crab apple blossoms everywhere. I could breathe deeply for the first time in a long while. Now, to this day crab apple blossoms look and smell like joy to me.

Joy is pure gift, pure grace, that does not depend upon us. **And** there is so much that gets in the way of joy. So, thanks be to God, Jesus gives us what we need to experience and participate in God's gift of joy more fully.

First, Jesus calls us to abide, to dwell, in a loving relationship with our creator where we can rest and breathe and be nourished. When we are struggling to experience joy, Jesus invites us to simply abide in God's love, to be nurtured by God's gifts. These gifts include rest, prayer, worship, creation, community, therapy, music, poetry, food, exercise, modern medicine. Medications that tend to our mental health are incredible gifts of God. Community is such an important gift. In community, others can pray for us, others can hold onto hope on our behalf when we can't imagine ever feeling joy again. If you are struggling to know joy, just rest in God today. This community will hold on to hope for you.

Jesus also calls us into ways of being that help us and others to experience joy. Jesus commands us to love others as God loves us - to love freely, without judgement, without expecting others to earn love - and to live out grace and mercy for the sake of others. Jesus commands us to give of ourselves, especially for those who are suffering most.

This is a joyful way to be in the world. It isn't something we can muster up on our own. We can live this way because God gives us what we need to love when it is hard, when we are afraid. We can live this way because God's grace frees us from sin and empowers us to address racism, injustice, poverty, suffering. We are loved so that we can love others.

Joy is God's gift to all people, to you. Joy does not depend upon you. It is not something you have to summon on your own. Joy will come unbidden and lift you up. Jesus also gives you what you need to experience and participate in joy more fully. Jesus draws you into relationship with God and into a joyful, loving way of being in the world.

Jesus wants you to know joy - joy in the face of death, joy in the face of sorrow and fear and uncertainty, joy within you, joy that is complete.

Today, Jesus' word comes to you that you may know joy.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.