



Sunday May 5, 2024
John 15:9-17 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

I want to be really clear about something. The direction of my sermon today isn't at all where I planned it would go. But I feel like I need to be upfront with you because these last few weeks have been a lot – and if I'm being honest, then it all feels like a very heavy weight right now. And perhaps as your pastor I shouldn't be sharing all this with you, but, if we're going to have any authenticity and depth to our relationship then I just can't stand up here week after week and pretend that none of the realities of life ever get to me.

Over the past few weeks people I care about have spent their last days in hospice, we held multiple funerals, church members and friends have had loved ones die unexpectedly, more and more people sat in my office or called to talk about their growing anxiety, relationship and financial struggles, health challenges, and grief. And then there was the news of yet another active shooter situation but this time it involved a middle school student with a gun, plus countries continuing to be at war, destructive tornadoes, a 4-year-old dying because of a reckless driver, and leaders behaving badly and making selfish decisions. To top it off question after question kept flooding in, "*How can this be*", "*How could this happen*", "*Why is this happening to us*", "*When will it end*", and "*How much more am I supposed to take?*" I have to tell you, some days it's all a bit much for my heart.

I'm telling you all this because when I read Jesus' words in today's gospel about joy and love they seem so incredibly out of place – so out of touch with reality. And all I want to do is say to Jesus, "*Sorry, buddy but I'm not seeing or feeling any of the joy you speak of!*" And if I were bold enough, I'd even ask, "*Where Jesus – where is all this joy and love at a time like this?*"

It makes me wonder then if the disciples were asking this very same question? After all, where we find them in today's gospel is in the middle of the farewell discourse – the part of John's gospel when Jesus is preparing to offer his parting words to them. Over the next few chapters there will be words about rejection, and hatred, and abandonment. And yet we'll also receive even more words about joy.

But I have to tell you, *joy* seems so completely out of place within these passages of Jesus' impending death and departure. Joy almost seems *inappropriate* – especially after been told that the one you've been relying on will soon no longer be around.

Because where is joy in the midst of the hardship Jesus described and in the danger that's sure to come? Where is joy when a primary source of your joy is leaving you? Where is joy when you need it the most?

Joy can be elusive. And sometimes true joy is hard to come by and seems impossible when one starts down the road of real life. Sometimes finding joy takes work. It takes effort. It takes intention. And sometimes joy escapes us for a while...a long while.

So in my search for joy I've been reading and re-reading today's gospel, wrestling with it, and allowing it to dwell in me. And while it shouldn't surprise me, yesterday the answer came as we were sharing communion with 36 middle schoolers at the end of our JOLT retreat.

Love. Loving one another is the answer to seeing and experiencing the joy Jesus speaks of. But not just *any* joy, rather it's *God's joy* that is ours. That's how our joy is made complete. It's in following Jesus' command to love, but not just loving in a generic way – but the way Jesus loves us – the way God loves us.

The gospel points out that no one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Laying down one's life is about sacrifice and a willingness to let go of that which is most precious to us. And what is the most precious thing we have? Our life. So, loving in this manner then is a willingness to give up what we hold precious to us, and in doing so we place a higher value on the joy of another over trying to hold onto our own happiness, security, comfort, or anything else.

Then Jesus goes even deeper to explain the kind of love that he says will bring about the joy he describes.

When he speaks of us not being the ones to *choose him*, but instead being the ones *chosen by him* – what does he mean by this? Well, I think he's describing the immeasurable value that God has placed upon *us* in order to indicate the true depth of love that God has *for* us, and the relationship God wants to have *with* us.



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Last week I spent time with the participants in our GriefShare group for our final session of this 13-week cycle. And I'll share with you that listening to each of these people share their incredibly painful stories of grief and loss is by far one of the most difficult things God calls me to do as a pastor. But I learned something long ago about people who are grieving the death of a loved one – it's that deep down people have a strong desire to share stories about their loved ones.

And so last Tuesday, just like every final session of GriefShare, I asked each of the participants to bring a few pictures of their loved ones and together we would share stories and spend time weeping and laughing around those stories. And that's exactly what we did. We shared. We cried. We laughed. And in the midst of all their grief – there was love, and understanding, and support, and encouragement.

There's something else I've discovered in doing grief ministry for such a long time. When people are given permission and encouraged to share stories about their loved ones there's an indescribable joy that wells up within them as they remember and celebrate who their loved one has been in their life and the impact they've had on them and others. Simultaneously there is unbelievable pain at the absence of a loved one, but there's also overwhelming joy because they were part of their life.

And so we sat and shared stories, and wiped tears, and laughed...and most importantly the love of God worked in and through each of us as we answered the command to love one another through it all. *"This is my commandments, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

In today's gospel from John, the love that Jesus speaks of is both a gift and a command. The love that Jesus displays for the world is a love whose origin is in God the heavenly Father. The Father's love overflows through Jesus, and Jesus' love overflows through us. Love is who God is, and love is what God does.

In our culture today, *"love"* is often associated with things that are soft, safe, and warm. But the kind of love that Jesus commands is dangerous, fierce, and costly. *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

Like I shared earlier, dwelling in the midst of people's grief stories is some of the hardest things I'm called to do as a pastor, but it's also one of the places I'm blessed to experience how the world shaping, life-transforming power of God's love can bring about God's joy as it is made complete in others as well as in my own life.

So my friends, I'm wondering, what is it that *you* need to remind you that joy is still abundantly available and present in the face of all that seems determined to steal your joy away? And who do you need around you to help you see that joy is already here?

I wonder what would happen if each of us took a few moments each day to breathe in God's love. And if we took time to do that I wonder if we would see that the God we've been searching for, and in fact the joy that we've been searching for is already here.

The promise of joy in the midst of all that was named earlier and so much more is not simply an answer, so much as it is 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 want to love you. It is this hope that carries us – that even in the darkest places, God's abiding and our abiding in God will fill us with God's joy and our joy may be complete. ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*** Amen.