

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have had many good things come to us by way of the selected readings used here in church during the time of Easter. We had proof of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus promised the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Jesus encouraged us by letting us know he is our Good Shepherd. He is the vine and we are the branches. Today, again, Jesus gifts us with more good things that come to us only by his grace!

Jesus speaks to us a very clear message about what his plan is for us. He says,

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” John 15:11

If there is one thing we all want more of and need more of it is joy. Not happiness. Joy. Happiness is elusive and transient. It depends on the weather and things like our digestion. Forget about happiness. Happiness is a lost cause. Jesus is talking about something as superior to happiness as gold is superior to sandstone. Jesus is leading us into his joy – that our joy may be FULL. If we have any sourpusses in the crowd who don't want to be lifted into God's joy, please leave now!

What does Jesus say about joy? He relates it to love. The two are connected. We know in the New Testament it talks a lot about love. Love, love, love, love, love. Well, it also says God IS love, so no surprise in all the talk about love. Today Jesus relates the fullness of his joy to love. He starts us off with a power passage. Jesus says,

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” John 15:9

Well I guess we can stop right there. The Father can't possibly love Jesus any more than he already does. Jesus loves us as much as he is loved by the Father. It looks like we are in good shape. Family, friends, co-workers and telemarketers may not love us all the time. Jesus loves us all the time and his love for us is complete.

Jesus gives us quite the illustration of how much he really does love us. First, Jesus says,

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13

Jesus said that. Then he did that when he offered himself in our place upon the cross of Calvary. O what wondrous love! When we were helpless and bound fast in the chains of evil’s power and death Jesus rescued us unto eternal goodness and life by trading places with us and taking our sin and death with him to the grave to haunt us no more forever.

This is where our journey to that fullness of joy begins. But Jesus isn’t done with us yet. There are many treacherous bridges to cross. Many daunting forks in the road from which we must choose. Those bridges often collapse from underneath us. How often we choose the path that leads us to pain and sorrow and affliction. It’s true. Jesus now has some guidance for us to help keep us in his joy.

“Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.” John 15:9-10

To know the joy of Jesus he says it is imperative for us to abide in his love. This makes perfect sense. Who are your best friends? They are the ones who treat you well and who you treat well. Who are your favorite neighbors? Same thing. All the people we enjoy most in our lives are the ones where we have some sort of relationship based in kindness, respect, generosity, and compassion. We can love our grouchy neighbor and take his garbage cans back to his driveway when the wind blows them away, but we will never enjoy that relationship. The lady across the street who feeds our cats when we are on vacation and to whom we give fresh lettuce from our garden – that kind of relationship brings us joy. This is what Jesus is talking about here. We cannot enjoy life if we don’t abide in Jesus’ love.

Back in 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, wrote his book *The Gay Science*. In that book he used a phrase that has become quite well-known. He said that God was dead. He wrote,

(Words of the madman) “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us?” Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science*

How did this phrase get so well-known and what did Nietzsche mean by it? Nietzsche was a devout atheist, so he did not mean that at some point there had been a god and now that god no longer existed. What Nietzsche did mean, however, was that Christian morality based on the bible had ceased to be the underlying, guiding rule in the western world, especially among the educated and intellectual sort. “God is dead,” he said, “And we have killed him.” People were no longer abiding in God’s love. They were shifting to being guided not by God’s commandments, but by science and human reason. Scientific research in all areas of life will now reveal which bridges to cross and which to abandon. Which forks to take to the left and which to take to the right. Married couples with children should stay together not because God said that what he has joined together let no one separate, but they should stay together because research has shown it is the best practice for raising emotionally healthy children. You see how the process works? This approach of abandoning the wisdom of the bible and discerning which are the best choices to make based on scientific research is the way our world now works. Just think what has happened in our world since 1882 when Nietzsche coined his famous phrase! The root problem is not that science is not useful and gives false answers. The root problem is that many scientists have become like ships without a rudder. They are like trains that have no track to keep them on the right path. Our society has lost its moral genetic code that kept it at least somewhat on the right ground. Nietzsche, an atheist, here laments this new society unleashed from the Christian commandments. He does not like what he sees.

“What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?” Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science*

Well, God is NOT dead by a longshot. And he still speaks to us. In the mist and fog or our current moral confusion, the Lord guides us and says,

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

How has Jesus loved us? He has loved us in his Truth, his Justice, and his Grace. Every word that Jesus speaks to us in his word is true. That is the path of love for us to follow. Abiding in his love, we always speak truthfully with others. No lies, no cover-ups, no deceptions, no double talk, no veiled meanings. You get the picture. Jesus is also working out perfect justice. We know much about his justice from his voice in our conscience. Jesus always did the right thing every time. He has given us his word and our conscience to guide us into what is right. Jesus was all about helping the sick, the hungry, the downtrodden, the sorrowful, the exploited. He tells us time and time again to treat others just as we would want them to treat us. That is justice. This point is amplified as we confess in the creed that in his final appearing he will judge the living and the dead. Finally, Jesus always deals with us in his grace. This means that the things he does for us we do not actually deserve. Why does he still do all these things? Because he is a God of compassion and mercy. Without this grace of God we would have no hope. We would have no chance of enjoying the good things of God. We would have no spirit, no faith, no understanding, no forgiveness and reconciliation with God, no future, and we would not have the love of God in our hearts. As we walk in the path of Jesus' grace, we reveal him to others as we do not hold the trespasses of others against us, but live in the grace and mercy of God.

It is not hard to understand that when we follow in these footsteps of Jesus and abide in his love – his truth, justice, and grace, how much more likely it is for us to have joy. This is why we were created. When we get back on the way of Jesus love we will have the joy Jesus talks about and we will be on our way to having it in all its fullness.

God bless us as we thank Jesus for the infinite love he has for us - the same love that the Father has for him, and as he leads us into the fullness of the joy of the children of God. Amen.

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