

May 10, 2009

John 15:1-17

## ABIDING JOY

There's a commercial currently running on television that goes like this. Two young men are sitting beside a pool, eating the new Taco Bell salads, and they are arguing about whether or not these new offerings from the fast food chain are actually salads since they can't find any lettuce.

Eventually a lovely lady stops by and shows the one guy who was insisting it was not a salad where to find the lettuce. He dutifully looks, sees a little lettuce, and admits that it is "technically" a salad. She smiles and agrees, saying, "Technically."

As she walks away, he turns to his buddy and asks, "Do you think she's into me?" His friend pauses, then responds, "Technically? No." Our Scripture passage this morning from John's gospel says that God, technically, is definitely into us.

This is the final time in John's Gospel that Jesus uses the "I am" phrase to contrast who He is with would-be pretenders. "I am the good shepherd; I am the door; I am the way, the truth, and the life." And here Jesus proclaims, "I am the vine."

In the Old Testament, Israel is described as being God's vineyard. And now Jesus describes Himself as the one and only vine in God's vineyard, the vine to which the disciples are attached, and they must abide in Him. The result of abiding in Jesus is fruitfulness and joy.

This passage reemphasizes the declaration made at the beginning of the Gospel: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us – pitched His tent among us. He was not just passing through, but was here for the long haul. He tented among us.

This is intensely personal imagery. God is not aloof, far off, or impersonal. God the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit, is permanently attached to the people God lovingly created. In this year of the celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed movement, which gave birth to the Presbyterian Church, it is appropriate that I quote a relevant passage from Calvin's "Institutes."

God could have created us for His usefulness but His love is demonstrated to us in that He also created us for His sheer delight. (3, 10, 2) You see? God has this thing for us – He’s into us. He loves us. He delights in us. He takes joy in us. He abides with us so that we may take joy in Him.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has as its first question: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Enjoy. Joy. This joy is very personal – not abstract.

It comes from having a very personal relationship with the God whom we know as Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. And once God connects with us, God stays connected. He loves us no matter what. And what He asks of us in return is to be connected: love God, love one another. That cannot be accomplished without being in relationship with God and others.

How do we have a personal relationship with the God who created the universe? We abide in Jesus. How do we do that? Here are three ways that this Scripture text tells us.

First, we accept the fact that Jesus loves us and chooses us. It doesn’t matter how bad we have been or think that we still are. He loves us and has already chosen us to be attached to Him for eternity.

If we read the Old Testament, we see that Israel turned away from God time and again; yet God kept coming back for them. Jesus repeatedly told His disciples and anyone else who would listen that God keeps coming back because God loves what He has created.

God loves you. Period. You cannot change that fact. Jesus died and rose and ascended to prove it. When we finally accept this, Jesus, through the indwelling of His Spirit, infuses us with enormous staying power when the going gets rough – when we find it hard to bear fruit; when our fears and failures threaten to overwhelm us.

Martin Luther wrote that when life threatened to defeat him or overwhelm him, he would look into a mirror and loudly proclaim, “I am baptized.” You are baptized. You have been claimed by God through Jesus Christ. You

have been filled with the Holy Spirit to proclaim what God in Jesus has done.

-3-

You have the power to bear fruit. Now go and do it! That is the second thing this text tells us. Last month I urged you to go and tell your stories. Here it is again. You are grafted into Jesus. You have His power within you to enable you to tell your stories. So, go and bear fruit.

There is an unbelievable depth of joy that we experience when we share the Lord with others. It is the joy that is the joy of the God-head, the Three-in-One. It flows from the Trinity into us and out of us into those with whom we come in contact. It is contagious, it is powerful, and it is our gift from God to share.

First, we accept being loved by God. Second, we share that incredible revelation, that unending gift, the story of God loving us with others. Third, Jesus tells us to keep His commandments: to love as He has loved us. “As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love.”

I know, it’s easier said than done. Mark Twain is credited with saying, “I love mankind. It’s people I can’t stand.” I get it. People can be annoying, hurtful, mean-spirited, thoughtless, and devastatingly cruel. But Jesus does not tell us to love those who love us. We are to love as He loves.

Being a Christian is a way of life, not a religion or a philosophy. If we claim we are followers of Jesus, then we must obey Him and live as He did. So the question for us is, “Will we obey? Will we follow Him?”

Folksinger and sometime philosopher Bob Dylan sang, “Everybody serves somebody.” Whom do you serve? We can answer “Yes” to our peers, to our family, to our friends, to popular fads, to Madison Avenue’s take on what constitutes the “good life;” or we can say “Yes” to Jesus.

The Lord assures us that when we obey His command to abide in Him, to love as He loves, that we will find our true freedom, our true destiny, the abundant life He promises, that we will find joy – the very joy of God. And we don’t have to die to experience it. Joy – the joy Jesus gives – is available here and now without end. We just need to abide in Him.

Even if we don't understand what is happening, even when life kicks us in the teeth, even when we feel like giving up, if we just abide in Jesus, we will know joy because we are in that intimate relationship with the Lord of life.

-4-

Bishop William Willimon of the United Methodist Church tells this story. "Years ago, during the 'Iranian Hostage Crisis' I had a conversation with a woman, a secretary at Duke University (where he was Chaplain), who told me that she had gotten to know a graduate student from Iran.

"She had now received him into her home where he lived with her family. Because of the Iranian revolution, his funds had been cut off and she was trying to find him odd jobs in town to support himself. I heard her story when she tried to get me to hire the young man to work in my yard.

"Does he support the revolution?" I asked. 'He thinks it's all just wonderful,' she replied. 'Well I think it's rather remarkable that you have befriended him and that you are working to help him out, that you have received him into your home. How did you come to do that?' I asked in amazement. She slammed her fist down on her desk. 'Because I'm a Christian, darn it. You think this is easy?'"

No, it was not easy for her to do that. But she was abiding in Jesus, and He gave her the strength to love someone as Jesus loved her. It's what He does when we abide in Him.

In his book, "When the Game Is Over It All Goes Back in the Box," John Ortberg writes that he has 4 tennis balls on his desk to remind him of 4 words that he wants to keep preeminent in his life. The 4<sup>th</sup> tennis ball has the letter "J" on it for joy.

Ortberg writes, "Jesus gave a kind of mission statement for his teaching one time: 'I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.' Based on this statement alone, we can conclude that Jesus had a well-recognized capacity for joy that drew people to him.

"And his plan for his followers was that they be joy sharers. Paul made it a command: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!'" One of the primary barriers that prevents people from wanting to know God is joy-impaired Christians."

What I'm talking about is not happiness. Joy goes much deeper than being happy. In fact, it is possible to have joy when your life is filled with much stress and unhappiness.

-5-

Joy is knowing that you belong to God no matter what. Joy is knowing that Jesus loves you when no one else does. Joy is total confidence in Jesus when He says He has overcome the world.

Self-described Presbyterian hippie folksinger, David Bailey, now fighting his second battle against a vicious form of brain cancer, writes that he begins every day, before he even gets out of bed, saying, "Hallelujah! I've got one more day."

David has the joy of Jesus because he abides in Jesus. This joy is ours when we abide in Jesus. As Helen told the children, a flashlight has to have batteries to be of any use. We must abide in Jesus if we are to be of use to Him. Abide in Him, let His joy fill you to overflowing, then share the joy.

When Karen Latta was the music director of the New Wilmington Mission Conference, every summer when the staff gathered for our Day of Prayer, she would have us sing "Joy to the World." Yes, it was July, and it was very, very hot in Beeghley Theatre. But belt it out, we would.

Karen rightly told us that we have the joy of Jesus, and there is no reason in the world not to sing "Joy to the World" any time we want to sing it. This is not just a Christmas song – it is a Christian declaration: "Joy to the world: the Lord is come!" So we will sing this wonderful carol this morning to proclaim that we are filled with the joy of knowing Jesus as our Lord and Savior. There is no greater joy.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we are so filled with joy because You abide in us, and we will always abide in You, and nothing, not even our failings as disciples, can separate us from Your abiding love. Thank You for abiding in us and filling us with Your joy. Now help us to share that joy with others. We ask it in Your precious Name. Amen. [Adapted from William Willimon]

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