

Sermon for May 9, 2021

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If you were asked to use one word to describe a feeling you experienced this past year what would it be?

My guess is not many of you choose the feeling “joy.” This has been a hard year. Many of us may say that the circumstances of the year limited, even squelched joy. But I recently read a quote by Russell Nelson that said “The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.”

Wartburg Seminary, in response to a longing for joy started a Monday small group following chapel titled “Joy Drop.” It is an intentional opportunity to focus on joy. We gather and share stories of our experiences of joy throughout the week. Taking time to focus on joy - name it, speak it aloud, hear others’ stories of joy - seemed to multiply joy. Knowing that on Monday I will be asked “Where have you experienced joy this week?” has helped me see joy, maybe even produce joy, in unexpected moments throughout the week.”

This past week I shared my joy drop. For over a year I have wanted to paint our front door. Our house is very grey and I thought a splash of cranberry on the front door would bring some joy to the greyness. During the pandemic we have discovered you can order paint by mail. So Serena and I poured over the color swatches online and ordered a gallon of that we believed to be “cranberry” paint. When it arrived I anxiously changed into paint clothes, grabbed the drop cloth and paint supplies and got set up to paint the door. Then I cracked open the paint tin to find florescent fuchsia colored paint – definitely not cranberry but rather glow in the dark “wow” pink. Not to be deterred I persisted and painted the door, using this unexpected vibrant color. Needless to say we are no longer the boring grey house on the block – the door has brought joy. No kidding people look as they walk by. My mother who lives across the street commented that the brightness radiating from her neighbor’s front door caught her eye before her eyes were even open and one of my friends after driving by suggested it be added to the Visit Duluth website as an area attraction. It has been an unexpected, semi-ridiculous “joy drop” in my week – this bright door bringing joy to the wholeness of our grey house to which it is attached.

How would you answer – where have you experienced joy this week?

In today’s gospel text Jesus speaks of joy. This section of John is one of the longest found in scripture. Jesus has been talking for two chapters and will continue for two more, concluding with a lengthy prayer for his disciples. Directly in the middle of all his words he says “I have said these things to you **so that my joy** may be in you, and **that your joy** may be complete.” – That my joy may be in you, that your joy may be complete.

Jesus longs for us to know complete joy. One might first limit this to meaning that Jesus wishes for us to always live in circumstances that create joy. We may equate the word “joy” with

“happiness”. But these words of Jesus follow Jesus telling his disciples of his upcoming suffering and death. They come right before Jesus speaks of the hardships that the disciples will endure. Joy will not be in them and complete because of happiness around them. The joy that Jesus wants for his disciples is grounded in more than circumstances, more than happiness, more even than the ability to focus and seek out joy in the small things around us. Jesus speaks these words that his joy may be within his people.

And what words does he speak that carry this joy? With words echoing the vine and the branches text from last week’s gospel Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; 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.”

“Abide in my love that my joy may be in you, that your joy may be complete.” Joy comes in abiding in Christ’s love.

One definition of abiding is “to stay stable or fixed in”. To abide in Christ’s love is then to stay stable or fix in Christ’s love. How does one do this? Jesus says “If you keep my commandments you abide in my love,” some translations read “Since you keep my commandments you abide in my love.” And Jesus goes on “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.” When we, loved by God, love one another - when we live as God commands, we stay stable/fixed in Christ’s love. Then Christ’s joy is in us and we experience complete joy. We experience Jesus’ joy, complete joy, when we love one another as God has loved us.

Think about how God loves us. God reveals Godself in Jesus - Jesus who served, Jesus who laid down his life for those he loved. This is how we are to love one another, with a willingness to serve, with a willingness to lay down our life for the world God loves; this is where we experience complete joy – his joy. This is joy that exceeds personal happiness. This is joy that exceeds circumstances. This is joy that exceeds our ability to focus. This is a joy dependent on our abiding in Jesus.

Jesus goes on “you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you.”

God is stable and fixed on us. God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit loves us and we abide in this steadfast, stable and fixed love.

C.S.Lewis in his poem “Nearer” writes “If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire; if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, (power, peace, eternal life) you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has (it) them.”

The good news is Jesus has drawn near to us. Jesus is close to us. Jesus is our “Joy Drop” that reminds us that despite all the grey around us, we are stable and fixed to Christ’s brightness.

Our Psalm today calls all of creation to rejoice in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. We are called to “re-joy” – to joy once again. This joy does not come because circumstances have

changed, not even because we are more focused in seeking joy. Rather it comes from Jesus' abiding presence in us, reminding us of the steadfast love of God in which we abide.

Our drab grey house is now attached to the glow of a bright and joyful fushia door and because it is attached the whole house now seems to radiate a new joy simply by its connection. And others have noticed. You are attached, fixed, abiding in Christ's love and joy. Your joy cannot be squelched. As you live God's commandments, as you love as God has loved, may you experience his joy. May you re-joy in all circumstances and may others notice as you love as God so loves you.