

"JOYFUL LIVING"
January 29, 1989

TEXT: John 15:11 "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

I once knew a man who liked to shock people by insisting that the Bible says, "There is no God." And, of course, he was right. You will find those words in Psalm fourteen, verse one. But he took them out of context, and the full verse reads, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" The words are there, but to understand them we need the context.

And the same thing is true of this morning's scripture reading. As beautiful and familiar as those words are, we can not fully understand or appreciate them without their context. And we have to go clear back to chapter thirteen in order to know what is going on. There, we discover that Jesus and his disciples are gathered together for what has come to be known as "the last supper." They have already eaten, and Judas has just gone out to betray his master. In a few short hours, Jesus will be arrested like a common criminal, tried before a "kangaroo court", mocked, tortured, and crucified. His followers will be frightened and confused beyond anything most of us can even imagine. They will run for their lives and hide like hunted animals. But, before that happens, Jesus gives them --and us-- one last gift.

In the short time left, he sums up his most important teachings. And, in what has come to be known as "the last discourse", he tries to prepare his followers for the days to come. It was in this context that Jesus spoke the words which now make up the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth chapters of John.

Clearly, then, this is no casual chit-chat. These are the most important things that Jesus had to say to his followers before the end closed in around him. It is that fact which gives these words the special impact they have always had. And it is that fact which makes them especially worthy of our careful and loving consideration. Now, of course, I can not do justice to three full chapters in one twenty minute sermon. So today, I would like to focus on just one important verse, John fifteen, verse eleven: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."

The first thing we notice about this verse --it practically jumps out at us-- is the apparent incongruity between these words and their context. Here is Jesus, about to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. There are his disciples soon to be filled with terror and despair. Yet even now Jesus speaks of joy. I am sure that I could not have done that. And the fact that Jesus could is what this sermon is about.

To begin with, it is pretty obvious that Jesus was not speaking of mere pleasure --that feeling of delight we find in certain sense stimulations. Not that there is anything wrong with pleasure. Far from it. God has given us pleasure and intends us to enjoy it. H. L. Mencken may have defined

"puritanism" as the "nagging suspicion that somewhere someone is enjoying himself", but that has never been a Christian attitude --not even among the Puritans. Still, pleasure depends upon outside stimulation, something we can taste, or touch, or see, or hear, or smell. And, as a result, it is short-lived and unreliable. Clearly, Jesus was not talking about that.

Nor was he talking about happiness. Happiness may be a step above mere pleasure, but it is no match for real joy. Joy is a distinctively Christian word and a distinctively Christian thing. Happiness is the result of what happens to us. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And those springs never run dry. Surely that is the kind of thing that Jesus was talking about, for there was nothing pleasant, or happy, about his situation. But he had joy singing its music in his soul even under the shadow of the cross. Who would not want that kind of joy?

And the good news is that we can have it. We do not have to go through life the victims of circumstance. Up one day, when things are going well, and down the next, when things go bad. Christ's joy is his legacy to us. He said, "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Joy is our divine heritage. We deserve it. And we ought to have it. Maltbie Babcock, the English minister whom some of you may know as the author of our well-known hymn, "This Is My Father's World", once said, "The Christian life that is joyless is a discredit to God and a disgrace to itself."

Joy is the echo of Christ's love in us. But the sad fact is that not everyone hears it. Perhaps they are too busy listening to other voices. For joy is not loud like happiness, nor shouting like pleasure. It is not demanding like duty, nor imperious like necessity. Yet it is there. Waiting, in its own quiet way, to be grasped by those wise enough to seek it and to seek it in the proper place. And where is that place? Let us turn once more to Jesus's own words in this morning's scripture. He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." Christian joy, like Christian achievement, results from a continuing relationship to Christ.

And that may explain why so many never find it. We are too busy looking for pleasure or happiness. So we look in all the wrong places. We look to money, or success, or power. We look to sex, or alcohol, or drugs. We look to recreation, or work, or family. We look to all kinds of things, many of them fine in themselves (and some not so fine). But none of them brings even happiness, much less true joy. The best they can do is to offer a momentary pleasure. The joy that Jesus had, the kind he left to us, is found in only one place. In his own abiding presence.

Yet so few of us experience that presence. Some shut him out completely, but I do not suppose that many of those are here this morning. What may be here, however, are well-meaning people who open their lives to Christ, but only in a very gingerly and fitful way. People who come to church, some now and then and others quite often, but who rarely think of Christ the rest of the week. People who even if they have some kind of daily devotions, nevertheless compartmentalize Christ. Ten minutes for Jesus, the other 1430 for ourselves. Is it any wonder that his joy has so little place in our lives?

How much power do you think your car battery would have if you charged it no oftener than that. To work properly, that battery needs to be charged continuously while it is being used. That is why a car comes equipped with an

alternator. Or how much tan do you think you would get in the summer if you spent just ten minutes out in the sun and the rest of the time indoors .

Well, it has been my experience that our share of Christ's joy needs constant renewing, too. And how do we go about doing that? By abiding in his presence. By our conscious awareness of Christ's presence all through the day. I know it is not easy. Most of us have other habits developed over long periods of time. But we can do it. We must if we want to experience Christ's promised joy. And we can do it quietly, without any kind of fanfare or drawing attention to ourselves.

What I do is to speak to Him as often as I can during the course of my day. Not necessarily anything special. Nothing you would really call a prayer. Just talk to him about whatever is on my mind. "It's a nice day, Lord." "I must really hurry if I'm going to get this done, Lord." "Wow, I really goofed that time, Lord." "Thank you for the nice lunch, Lord."

And, to make sure that I do not forget, I make a special point to talk to him, as I would to any other passenger, each time I get into my car. Of course, that felt rather silly the first few times I did it. But after a while it began to feel quite natural. And it is one way of keeping myself aware of his nearness. Otherwise, I find myself getting ready for bed without having thought of him all day long. I am not saying that would be terribly sinful. But my awareness of him that gives me a peace and a joy I do not otherwise have. I know, of course, that he is always there, offering his gifts to me. But somehow I do not seem to experience them unless I abide in him.

Now, some of you will probably think I am just being silly. But let me ask you one question. Do you experience Christ's promised joy and peace as often and as fully as you would like to? If so, then do not change a thing! But, if not, then I suggest you do what I do. Try to find some way to become more consciously aware of his presence. "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is who bears much fruit" "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."