

INCREASE THE JOY!

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
May 12, 1985 John 15:9-17

Ellie and I made another flying trip to Minnesota this past week; in fact, she is still there. Ellie's nephew was killed in an airplane crash last Sunday. He was only 26 years old. What a tragic Mother's Day present! Ellie's Aunt is in the hospital, expected to live only a few days, and on it goes...

Sometimes we forget; we get anesthetized by our comfortable lives and forget that death is part of life. Life, as we know it on this earth, hangs by a thin thread, so fragile, so tenuous, so precious.

Our gospel lesson this morning is fully aware of the realities of life, yet it speaks of joy. During the last supper, after Judas had left the room, according to John, Jesus had a fireside chat with his friends; a heart-to-heart talk with his companions who had walked with him, shared his experiences, heard his teachings, observed his healings, and now were perplexed at what was happening. Jesus knew why Judas had left. Jesus had strong premonitions about his imminent death. Jesus wanted to talk.

During his talk, Jesus said, (John 15:11) "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full." In the midst of life, there is joy. Whatever life is dealing you at the time, you may experience joy. Jesus offers joy. At the heart of the salvation experience, the redemptive relationship, is joy! Joy implies a level deeper than laughter, deeper than surface happiness. Joy is a radiance, an unquenchable zest for life. Joy is contentment, well-being, and acceptance. Joy is peace, warmth and love. Joy is undefeatable, victorious and confident. Increase the joy is our challenge today. Increase the joy is our possibility. Increase the joy in you, in your home, in our church, in the world. "I have told you this so that your joy may be full."

How? How can joy, in the midst of whatever life is dealing you, be experienced? How can joy be increased? Jesus told us in this lesson, "Abide in my love." The fact that the Creator of all there is, loves you is a profound truth; grasped and understood, not by our minds or logic or comprehension, but by faith. Don't try to understand God's love or explain it; relax, experience, and enjoy! Anthony de Mello writes in The Song of the Bird:

The Look of Jesus

In the Gospel according to Luke we read: But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." At that moment, while he was still speaking, a cock crew; and the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter...and Peter went outside and wept bitterly.

I had a fairly good relationship with the Lord. I would ask him for things, converse with him, praise him, thank him..

But always I had this uncomfortable feeling that he wanted me to look at him. And I would not. I would talk, but look away when I sensed he was looking at me.

I was afraid. I should find an accusation there of some unrepented sin. I thought I should find a demand there; there would be something he wanted from me.

One day I finally summoned up courage and looked! There was no accusation. There was no demand. The eyes just said, "I love you."

And I walked out and, like Peter, I wept.

Jesus gave us a tender feminine image of God in Luke 13:34-35. God is like a mother, a mother's love. Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me." Let Christ love you. Let God, like a mother hen, gather you under her wings, to protect you, to keep you, to hold you. Accept, receive Christ's love of you. Abide in Christ's love.

But, how do you abide in Christ's love? How do you continue to remain in God's love? Jesus is a very practical, down-to-earth person. Jesus doesn't leave us in mysticism. Jesus doesn't leave us in emotionalism. Emotions and feelings are fickle and unpredictable. Jesus grounds our joy, our abiding in his love, in practical day-by-day living. Jesus said (John 15:10), "If you keep my commandments, you abide in my love." Jesus told us that our religion, to be authentic, to be joyful, must be expressed in action: keep the commandments.

What are the commandments? I've just finished a series of sermons on the commandments which are summarized, culminated, crowned in the simple, but so profound, statement by Jesus in John 15:12, "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you." A psychology professor who had no children of his own would frequently reprove a neighbor scolding a child, saying "You should love your boy, not punish him." One hot summer day, the professor repaired his concrete driveway. Tired after several hours of work, he laid down the trowel, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and saw, out of the corner of his eye, a mischievous little boy putting his foot into the fresh cement. He rushed over, grabbed him, and was about to spank him when a neighbor yelled, "Watch it professor! Don't you remember? You must love the child." At this, the psychologist yelled back furiously, "I do love him in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

But Jesus calls us to love in the concrete--not in theory, but in practice--to love not just in prayer but in the home, not just to love people we like but our brothers, sisters, and parents as well, not just people we haven't met yet but our church family. We are called to abide in God's love; not to understand it, but to express it. Love is not so much a thought as an act. Love one another.

How much? How extensively do we love another? Our lesson continues. "As I love you," said Jesus. Look how Jesus loves you. Jesus forgives you, over and over. Complained the husband, "Why do you keep talking about my past mistakes? I thought you had forgiven and forgotten." "I have, indeed, forgiven and forgotten," said the wife. "But I want to make sure you don't forget that I have forgiven and forgotten." Love keeps no record of wrongs, Paul told us in I Corinthians 13. Jesus forgets. Jesus washes the chalk board clean. Give others a second chance as God gives you.

Look how Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you the best! Love is not like a loaf of bread where each slice eaten diminishes the size of the loaf. Love grows as it is shared; it expands as it is given. There is always enough love, more than enough, to go around. Mothers know what I'm talking about. A mother's love is not divided among the children. A mother loves each child the best! They each receive her wholehearted, undivided love. Hear the modern prophet, Erma Bombeck.

It is normal for children to want assurance they are loved. Having all the warmth of the Berlin Wall, I have always admired women who can reach out to pat their children and not have them flinch.

Feeling more comfortable on paper, I wrote the following for each of my children.

TO THE FIRSTBORN

I've always loved you best because you were our first miracle. You were the genesis of a marriage, the fulfillment of young love, the promise of our infinity.

You sustained us through the hamburger years. The first apartment furnished in early poverty...the 7-inch TV set we paid on for 36 months.

You wore new, had unused grandparents, and had more clothes than a Barbie doll. You were the "original model" for unsure parents trying to work the bugs out. You got the strained lamb, open pins and three-hour naps.

You were the beginning.

TO THE MIDDLE CHILD

I've always loved you best because you drew a dumb spot in the family and it made you stronger for it.

You cried less, had more patience, wore faded and never in your life did anything "first," but it only made you more special.

You are the one we relaxed with and realized a dog could kiss you and you wouldn't get sick. You could cross a street by yourself long before you were old enough to get married, and the world wouldn't come to an end if you went to bed with dirty feet.

You were the child of our busy, ambitious years. Without you we would never have survived the job changes, the house we couldn't afford and the tedium and the routine that is marriage.

You were the continuance.

TO THE BABY

I've always loved you best because endings are generally sad and you are such joy. You readily accepted the milk-stained bibs. The lower bunk. The cracked baseball bat. The baby book, barren but for a recipe for graham cracker pie crust that someone jammed between the pages.

You are the one we held onto so tightly. For you see, you are the link with a past that gives a reason to tomorrow. You darken our hair, quicken our steps, square our shoulders, restore our vision and give us humor that security, maturity and endurity can't give us.

When your hair line takes on the shape of Lake Erie and your children tower over you, you will still be "The Baby."

You were the culmination.

Jesus loves you the best. Loving others as Jesus loves you means giving your whole-hearted, unrestrained, uninhibited love.

Look how Jesus loves you. He died for you. That is love; not feelings, but action. Jesus continues in our lesson (John 15:13), "Greater love has no one than this, that you lay down your life for your friends." Be willing to sacrifice your dreams, hopes, goals for your spouse, your children, your parents, your neighbor in response to the call of Christ.

Then you will know the joy! Increase the joy in your heart, in your home, in our church, by abiding in God's love by keeping the commandments which are summarized by Jesus, "Love one another as I love you."

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