

“God of Joy”

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May 10, 2015 Easter 7B (Mother’s Day)

Psalm 98 John 15:9-17

The famous nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, once expressed his disdain for Christians by commenting that they “should *look* more redeemed.” He was thinking of the stern and often joyless German Protestants he grew up with. But this criticism might apply to some of us today as well. We call the message of the gospel “good news,” yet many Christians look and act as though they are weighed down with heavy burdens and have no sense of humor, or joy in life. Some people don’t seem to feel joy at all. Some may feel it, but we are self-conscious about expressing it. We may allow *other people* to express joy in worship, but don’t let them get too enthusiastic, or else we may feel uncomfortable!

But if you think about it, you can’t really blame Christianity for people’s lack of joy. Paul Tillich suggested it’s because people are not Christian *enough*.* In the Bible we are practically *commanded* to rejoice. The Psalm that Tom read this morning calls us to “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises...” (vs. 4). Psalm 47 tells us to “Shout to God with loud songs of joy.” (vs. 1). When was the last time you heard someone actually shout for joy in our church? We may shout for joy at a baseball game. People even jump for joy there. But in church? That would be weird! Yet, Paul told us to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” and added for emphasis, “Again I will say, rejoice.” (Phil. 4:4). That’s a command.

Now I’m not talking about fake joy. Some Christians think they’re supposed to look joyful all the time, and you can tell it’s not real. You can’t *make* yourself joyful, if it’s not there. And if you try, people can tell it’s not real, and they won’t trust you. I know some people struggle with depression, and that’s a real problem that makes it hard to feel joy. It’s important for us to honor individual struggles and not just demand that people get with the program and be happy.

In any case, joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness comes when things are going our way, when we get what we want, or at least are content or satisfied with what we have. Joy is much deeper. Joy comes when we are aware of God’s presence in our lives, whatever the circumstances, and wherever we may be. Joy is a sign of the spirit, a sign of God’s presence among us, that we should never ever squelch.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, I hear that when a candidate is being investigated for sainthood, one of the qualities they look for is evidence of joy. Joy is a sure sign that God is present in a person’s life, especially if it is found in the midst of hardship or suffering. True joy is not dependent on good conditions in our lives, such as good health, or wealth or friends. In fact, joy can also be found in times of fear, or persecution or suffering. Psalm 30 says, “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (vs.5). And in the next chapter of John Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn... you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.” (16:20).

Joy is a sign that God is there. But it’s hard to be aware of God’s presence. Many of us are too distracted by scattered thoughts and busy schedules. If we want to experience joy, we have to pay attention, we have to be mindful. And most of us are not

too good at being mindful. Have you ever tried to sit still for even a few minutes, and just pay attention to your breathing? It's not easy. Our minds tend to wander, we go over experiences from the past, or think about what we're going to say or do next. Or we get up because we suddenly think of something urgent we have to do. But if we can learn to sit quietly for a few moments, we at least open the way to be aware of God. That is the beginning of joy. Pay attention. Open up and welcome God's spirit.

Joy also takes us beyond ourselves. One way to kill joy is to make it all about us. True joy is focused outward. Joy is found when we can look beyond ourselves, in wonder at the world and in love and service to others. And so in the gospel lesson that Anne read today, Jesus connected joy with love. He said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love... I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Complete joy comes through love. And Jesus defines love this way, "Greater love has no one that this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Last Monday President Obama gathered with a group of black and Hispanic students from Lehman College in the Bronx. They were from disadvantaged backgrounds, and he met with them to talk about what could be done to help them reach their goals.** Some of them mentioned counseling and guidance programs. But one of them simply talked about love. Like our President, this young man grew up without a father. And sometimes he wondered why his father wasn't there and what happened to him. Obama said, "The only difference between me and a lot of young men in this neighborhood and all across the country, is that I grew up in an environment that was a little more forgiving." And he said, "... That's what this comes down to. Do we love these kids?"

Do we love them? Our police officers often risk their lives trying to control these young people, but what good does that do, if as a society we don't really care about them or love them? Are we willing to make any kind of sacrifice to let them know their lives matter? If society treated our own beloved children the way we treat these poor children from ghettos, we would do something about it.

Tom and I have our daughter Cassia with us this week, along with her 7 month old son. I remember how many hours of sleep I gave up for her when she was little, and how much money we spent feeding, clothing, educating and entertaining our three children, and trying to keep them sane. They changed my life by needing everything from me, but they also brought me great joy. And I see the same in Cassia today, the joy she receives from all she gives to that precious baby. Mothers will lay down their lives, day after day, in love for their children. And this brings joy and life.

There are also many people who are not mothers, who give. I think of you in this church who have taken children and/or adults into your own home when they were in need, and treated them as your own family. And we have teachers and coaches, mentors and counselors, who may not have children of their own, but who make a life of giving. Some of you care for aging parents or other relatives. It's not always a joyful experience to love others. It can be sad, frustrating, draining, even heart-breaking at times. But when we are willing to lay down our lives for others, in ways that can actually help them, that is a sign of true love. And real joy comes from letting go of ourselves and giving to others in love.

Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And he also said, “You are my friends, if you do what I command you (that is, if you love). I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends.”

Most of the time Christians think of themselves as servants. That’s what Jesus taught us to do. He told his disciples “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45). But in this passage, Jesus goes beyond that. Now he is calling us friends.

I heard of a man once who helped his friends build a business.*** The two friends were partners who invested money and bought distribution rights. The other man was involved from the start, but not a partner. He worked just as hard and was just as committed as the partners. But he was paid an hourly wage, while the other two shared the profits. And when the partners sold the business, they took the profit and went their way, while the man who worked an hourly wage gained nothing.

When Jesus calls us friends, we are no longer workers who labor for little or no reward. We are like partners who work together and share in the profit. But not everyone gets to be a partner or friend. Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” And what does Jesus command us? He said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” We become friends, we are considered partners, when we love as Jesus loved us. We are always *allowed* to serve. But until we love, we don’t share in the profit. And that profit is joy.

Today we gather at the table of the Lord. We call it the “joyful feast of the people of God.” At this table Jesus gathered his friends for a last meal together, before he was to lay down his life in love. And so when we come to this table, and eat the bread and drink the cup, we are declaring that we too want to be Jesus’ friends, to love as he loves us, and to experience the joyful feast of his love shared with others.

May we open our hearts. Don’t be afraid, sing out for joy. For our God is a God of justice, love and joy. Amen.

* Tillich, Paul, The New Being, chapter 19 “The Meaning of Joy,” as quoted on www.religiononline.org/cgi/bin/research.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=32.

** “Obama Finds a Bolder Voice on Race Issues,” by Peter Baker, The New York Times, Tuesday, May 5, 2015.

*** as told by “Creature Wayne” on http://d31517.h28.ghlnt.net/texts/john15_9.htm.