



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

7th Sunday after Easter: May 13, 2018

Sermon Title: "Joy"

Sermon Text: John 17:6, 11-19

John's Gospel can be inspiring, mystical, and otherworldly. But it can also be incredibly wordy, dense, and difficult to follow. Today's Gospel comes from that wordy, dense part of John. It's part of a prayer Jesus offers at the conclusion of the Last Supper and just before he's arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. But it's a unique prayer, because although it's Jesus talking to God, Jesus intends for his disciples to overhear it. And so this prayer functions as both a summary of Jesus's ministry and mission, *and* final instructions and prayerful wishes for his disciples, who within days will find themselves dazed, disoriented, and desperate for direction as their leader is tried, tortured, and executed.

This prayer is fascinating because Jesus offers it as he's standing at the threshold of heaven, just days from his death, a death and then a resurrection that will quite literally change *everything*. And from that vantage point, Jesus begins to reshape our understanding of what heaven is. Heaven isn't a tantalizing *prize for the perfect*, hanging there in the sky, which we strain to reach by climbing a ladder of our good works, only to realize that we're always at least one rung too far away.

Instead, heaven is a gift that Jesus alone can reach from the top shelf of eternity, a *gift* he delights in giving to the meek and the mourning, the broken and the forgotten, the persecuted and the poor in spirit. Even more surprising is the promise that heaven isn't merely a reward for enduring the drudgery of mortality. Heaven is something that, by God's grace, we can experience in this life as well.

One of the ways this foretaste of heaven comes to us is when we feel joy. Joy is a theme that runs throughout John's Gospel and it's a central part of Jesus's prayer. He prays that all of his followers will experience joy in this world. But what exactly is joy? We tend to use it as a synonym for happiness. But it's so much more than just being happy. Happiness is fleeting and often times even trivial. That's not a bad thing, but it just doesn't measure up to joy. Joy has a weightiness and a durability that mere happiness can't match.

As I read John's Gospel in general and Jesus's prayer in particular, I see three characteristics of holy joy that distinguish it and set it apart from mere happiness. The first is that **joy comes from outside of us**. We see that in today's Gospel, as Jesus prays for the joy he shares with God to be granted to the disciples. The best example of how this happens for us is baptism. Your baptism is that one singular moment of grace that'll keep you spiritually fed for the rest of your life, and inoculated against the poison of this world that tells you that you don't measure up... you aren't good enough... and you don't matter. In baptism we're forever reminded that our true worth comes not from the titles on our resume, the price tag of our possessions, or some choice we think we've made to accept Jesus. Our worth comes from

Jesus's eternal and loving claim of *us*. This is why we Lutherans are always saying, "Remember your baptism!" Because when we do, we renew and refresh the wellspring of our joy.

Second, **joy has a healing property about it.** Happiness can be here one minute and gone the next. As Christians there are no guarantees in this life that everything will go our way. We suffer the same ups and downs and bumps as bruises as everyone else, regardless how good we think we are. That's just life. We won't always be happy. But as Luther once wrote, "Joy is a certain freedom of heart, even in tribulation." That's because joy sinks deeply into our hearts and our bones and grants us a rich sense of contentment, peace, security, and belonging. Even when we're going through hell on earth, we can still feel *joy*, because we know our God is bigger than anything we're battling.

Finally, **joy is relational.** We can all think of people who exude a radiance that draws others in. Those are the people we want to be around. That's because joy is inherently attractive and relational. As our Gospel reading clearly teaches, joy is an intrinsic characteristic of the relationship Jesus shared with God the Father, and something Jesus in turn wanted all of his followers to share with him. Joy then begins in our relationship with Jesus, and is such a force of good that it can neither be hidden nor hoarded. It is effervescent. It bubbles over. It must be shared. You know, over the centuries, Christians have battled endlessly over ideas and doctrines. I don't mean to minimize the importance of those things. But if you want to share the Gospel effectively, and if you really want to grow the Church, ask God to grant you joy. Chances are that your joy in Christ will be the most powerful and attractive sermon anyone will experience.

Now we all know today's not just the Seventh Sunday of Easter; it's Mother's Day. So let's flesh this concept of joy out a little more with a very personal example of the power of joy that I think is appropriate to this day.

For many years in our early married life, Mother's Day was a source of great pain in our household. After so many miscarriages and health scares, we began to wonder if we'd ever be parents. We even fell into the terrible trap of thinking maybe we had done something to deserve this punishment. That of course isn't the way God works, but when you're going through a trial like that, it's easy to fall into critical and self-destructive thinking. The turning point for Linda and me came when we realized that this wasn't a problem we could solve on our own. If we felt called to be parents, the answer for us was to look **outside of ourselves** and pursue adoption. Believe me, it was a rocky road, one that many times we thought we would regret traveling. But when our daughter's birth parents selected us, and when that precious baby was placed in our care nearly 21 years ago, we experienced a joy we didn't think possible.

I'll never forget that first night with our baby daughter, in a hotel room 3,000 miles away from home. Linda and I were in awe of this new life. We placed her on our bed and just stared at her. With every breath our beautiful baby took, our joy grew larger. Before long, we discovered that the tears we had shed and the pain of infertility Linda had carried – especially on Mother's Day – evaporated. **Joy was healing** our hearts.

Remember the third characteristic of holy joy? **Joy is relational.** God's grace brought our little family together, and over the years initiated a further string of relationships through our

daughter with her teachers, friends, and other families. But maybe the most surprising relationship has been with our daughter's biological parents. We thought that relationship ended when they placed her with us two decades ago. But last fall, that relationship was quite surprisingly rekindled, and it has further knit our lives together in unexpected ways. God's joy continues to delightfully overflow in the five lives that were blessed and connected in that single adoption.

Friends, life is full of highs and lows. To be blunt, you will not always be happy. Life won't always go your way. Bad things sometimes happen to good people. But even if we can't always be *happy*, we can always be *joyful*. You can experience joy every day in the good news that Jesus Christ loves you, has claimed you, and keeps you close, now and for eternity. Joy is Jesus's desire for your life. And joy is Jesus's gift to you. For that, what else can we say but, "Thanks be to God." Amen.