



Joy Ride

Sunday, August 12, 2007

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Scripture Lesson: John 15:1-11

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

--John 15:11 [NRSV]

Several years ago, a movie hit the big screen that portrayed the plight of three middle-aged men in the midst of their midlife crisis. Mitch, Phil, and Ed had taken several extreme vacations together to escape their normal routines, to recapture their youth, and to search for the meaning of life. They'd gone skydiving and running with the bulls in Spain, and now in their latest adventure together wound up on a cattle ranch in New Mexico.

In the midst of their difficult adjustment from city slickers to cowboys, these adult

adolescents meet Curly, a leathery cowboy with confidence and bravado to spare. Though Curly is distant, he is admired by these men, and particularly by Mitch, *City Slickers's* main character.

In the key moment of the film, Mitch sidles up to Curly and asks him about the meaning of life. The cowboy holds up one finger and says, "The secret is this: one thing, just one thing." When Mitch asks for clarification, Curly says, "I can't tell you what it is. You have to figure it out for yourself."

Relational experts, psychologists, and psychiatrists spend countless hours trying to help people find that “one thing” that will enable them to discover meaning and purpose in life, that will help them be happy. And of course happiness is a big thing. We all want to be happy. Every one of us if asked would say we’d rather be happy than miserable, would rather feel on top of the world than on the downside of things.

But I have a question for you: “Does God Want Us to be Happy?” Is that God’s deepest hope for us? For you and for me?

What does our Lord say on this subject? He has an amazing word for us as we look at John 15:1-11.

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has

loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Hear those last words again: ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Now, I don’t think our Lord has anything against happiness, -- against you or I knowing happiness, -- against you or I being happy -- but it would seem (wouldn’t it?) from what he says here that he has a deeper hope in mind for us. And that deeper purpose, that deeper hope for us is joy.

Joy is different from happiness. Our word “happiness” comes from the Latin word *hap*, which means chance. Happiness, therefore, is based on happenings or circumstances. When all of my ducks line up in a row, when I’m on a roll, then I can be happy. Joy is something qualitatively different – an experience of delight that isn’t dependent upon our changing circumstances.

A story, an illustration of course is always better than any definition, a picture better than a thousand words. So here’s one.

One day, several years ago, an ice storm hit North Texas on Thanksgiving morning. A fellow pastor, Ed Young, relates that on that morning he had gone to the office to pick up the manuscript he had dictated for the sermon he was to preach that weekend. His oldest daughter, LeeBeth, was with him in their Suburban. As they were carefully navigating the icy streets leading to the office, they listened intently to the radio to get the latest traffic and weather reports. The news was gloomy: "The ice is terrible, treacherous, and dangerous. Don't go out if you don't absolutely have to. The driving conditions are hazardous." There were reports of falling trees and limbs, car accidents, freezing pipes, and all sorts of doom and gloom. Ed says he was starting to get a little depressed about this wintertime catastrophe.

Then he looked over at LeeBeth, who was seven years old at the time. She was bouncing around in her seat, hardly able to contain herself. "It's an ice storm, Daddy! Ice! We are going to go home and slide down the driveway! We're going to make snowmen! We're going to make snowballs and throw them at each other!"

The radio deejays, meteorologists, and traffic reporters were bemoaning the weather, but this little girl chose a different path. She chose joy. She chose to see

the beauty and fun in the circumstances.

I know that's a rather simplistic example, but it's something I think we can all relate to. For it's so easy, isn't it, to become fixated on the circumstances? Something isn't quite what we wanted it to be and so we're unhappy. But happiness is a myth. Just when we get one area of our life in order, something else happens to rock the boat. The happenings of our life are never hitting on all cylinders at exactly the same time. That's why happiness is a myth. It is something we can never attain because it is tied to the currents of changing circumstances.

Joy is different. *It's the confidence I possess or you possess by knowing and trusting God regardless of the circumstances.* It's the inner delight we derive from an intimate relationship with Christ. Happiness is circumstantial, but joy is relational. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. Our joy, our inner delight, our confidence, the peace that surpasses all understanding comes of being in intimate relationship with him.

Remember Eeyore, that depressed donkey in *Winnie-the-Pooh*? Eeyore is the one who eats thistles and is always complaining about something. He even lives somewhere called Gloomy Place.

A fair amount of the time we're like Eeyore, aren't we? But, despite the fact that many of us are like that, that's not what God wants for us. His plan has always been for the prevailing attitude of his children to be one of joy. *"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*

Notice: joy is woven into the very fabric and framework of who our Lord is, and he wants to reproduce his joy in us. Notice those words: *"that my joy may be in you"*. That's quite a thought, isn't it? That we should have the same joy that Jesus himself has! And the word translated here as "complete" in the original Greek can also mean "full," "robust," "mature."

Yes, Jesus experienced his share of pain and sorrow, but through and through he was first a man of joy. Think about it. He loved to pick up children. He feasted and imbibed to the point that some called him a glutton and a drunkard. His joy must have been infectious, contagious, because people were drawn to him like a magnet. We're not drawn to people who are sullen; we're drawn to those who are full of life. And he was full of life. He came to give us life, abundant life! He is able to give us – and does give us this life -- through the Holy Spirit!

Wouldn't you love to have his infectious, contagious *full-of-lifeness*, his *joy*, inside you? I sure would! And we *can*! Indeed, he purposes that we *will*! He wants to take us on a ride, **a joy ride**.

We all experience selfishness, bitterness, and fear from time to time – the things that have a way of blocking us out from joy -- what we might call "joy jammers." And we certainly can't just dredge up joy from within. We can't simply summon it up, self-produce joy at will. C.S. Lewis wrote a book about his conversion from agnosticism to Christianity titled *"Surprised by Joy."* Joy has an elusive, surprising quality about it; we can't (as I say) just produce it ourselves; it has to come to us from the outside. It has to come to us from God himself. *"I am the vine; you are the branches,"* Jesus said. It's that connection to the Vine, our life-giving source from whence cometh joy.

So, we can't produce joy in ourselves. But when we abide in Him we receive joy, we experience joy. And what does *abiding* mean?

It means for one thing, doesn't it, concentrating on *giving*, not *getting*. You know how, when you're feeling low, giving something to someone actually has a way of lifting your spirit. It just seems to be the case that we were built this way – that our

deep joy comes through giving, not getting.

Another way of abiding is to concentrate on *healing*, not *hurting*. Sadly, too often we concentrate on the hurting side of things, don't we? We like to keep score. And the grudge builds and builds and builds inside of us until we are ready to explode at the other person. But that's not what God does. God graciously, freely forgives you and me. When we forgive, when we are able to actually let go our wish to hurt someone back we experience a kind of joy in that, don't we? There's a release there that carries with a peace, a joy.

Then also there's abiding in the sense of concentrating on *God's power*, not on *our problems*. It is easy to become enmeshed and ensnared in our problems, but the Bible says to trust God "at all times" (Psalm 62:8). It doesn't say, "Trust in God *some* of the time; it says *all* of the time."

My mind goes back to the apostle Paul. In the first century, Paul spent a lot of time in prison because of his witness. But while he sat in a dark, dank, and dirty prison cell, he wasn't singing sad Johnny Cash songs. He wrote a

letter to other believers, and the letter is known as the book of Philippians in the New Testament. And take a wild stab at what the theme of Philippians is. Joy. Nineteen times the words *joy* and *rejoice* are used. Paul was joyful even in prison.

It's encouraging, isn't it, to know that God can use anything – bad times, good times, and mediocre times – to do good things, beautiful things in our lives even when all hell has broken loose? He is able to use all things – good, bad, and in between --- for our good and his glory. And because we know that, it should bring us joy in the middle of our trials and tribulations.

Closing Prayer:

Lord, we often forget that your holy intention for us all along has been joy, -- the joy that comes of intimate relationship with you – of abiding in you, of abiding in your love. Help us to have the confidence, and exuberant, abundant delight that comes of knowing and trusting that you are with us and that you are in control regardless of the circumstances. And then help us to exude this joy – your very own joy – in our relationships, and in our trials. Amen.