



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Finding Joy”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*John 15: 1-17*

For those of you who may not have children or grandchildren of an age to introduce you to such things, the character that is pictured on the front of our worship order, this morning, is ‘Joy.’ Joy is one of the characters of Pixar’s ‘Inside Out.’ Inside Out is a movie that takes place inside the mind of an adolescent girl – anthropomorphizing the emotions that such a child is dealing with. In the first of the now two movies of the series, without getting far deeper into it all than need be, Joy (along with Sadness) gets lost, and much of the movie depicts the journey of that young girl (and the emotions within her) as Joy and Sadness make their way back into her life. It’s a typically engaging Disney/Pixar film if you like such things, and I know it really hits home in a very relatable way with the teens and young adults of today, but the simple reason I put that image on the front of the worship order is that finding joy is at the heart of what Jesus explores in this portion of John 15. I’m not convinced, however, that, at least at first blush, we get a full sense of what Jesus is saying to those disciples, and to us, when he says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

Let’s take a second to be reminded of the context here. We remain now, for the third week, in this long speech that Jesus delivers to his disciples leading up to his arrest in chapter 18. It starts with the washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13, and continues on through that exchange in which Jesus tells the disciples that his time with them is coming to an end, Judas abruptly leaves the room, and everyone is more than a bit confused about what is happening and what is coming next. The promise of the Holy Spirit as God’s continued presence with them follows in John 14, and then Jesus flips to the other side of the coin. After telling them that their time together is coming to an end, Jesus spends chapter 14 telling them how he will remain with them in the time yet to come – by means of the Holy Spirit. Now, however, as we move into chapter 15, the question turns from how he will remain with them to how they will remain with him. That’s where this image of the vine and the branches comes in.

The imagery of the vine and the branches is intriguing – particularly when you take into account the fact that he was speaking to people of an agrarian society. This would have made sense to them. We get derailed quickly, however, when our allegorical reading hits notions of branches being cut off and thrown into the fire. Suddenly, our minds start focusing on depictions of damnation, fiery eternities, and all sorts of other terrifying notions. What we forget when we start diving down those rabbit holes, however, is that that’s not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus isn’t trying to scare some wayward disciples straight, he’s trying to explain to these confused

disciples what comes next. And what is that? What is the word we hear again and again and again? Abide!

We see that word 11 times in the course of seven verses here. ‘Abide in me.’ ‘Abide in my love.’ Some translations use ‘remain’ in place of ‘abide,’ but there’s no mistake that that’s the point that Jesus is making here. The question we need to be asking when we read these words is not something drawn from fear of what happens if we become the discarded. The question we need to be asking when we read these words is what it means to abide in him. And Jesus answers that question pretty clearly. “If you keep my commandments,” Jesus says in verse 10, “you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

So, let’s pause a moment to retrace our steps. In chapter 13, the disciples grow confused and worried about what seems to be unfolding. In chapter 14, Jesus speaks to that worry and confusion by promising that he will be with them in and through the gift of the Spirit that is soon to come. Then, in chapter 15, after having explained how he will remain with them, he looks to the other side of the coin and explains that that connection will be maintained through their abiding with him. And, how does one abide with him? They keep his commandments. All of that, of course, begs one more question: what does that mean? If we are to abide in him, and if abiding in him means keeping his commandments, what does that look like?

Well, he answers that one too, and that’s where we pick up our reading where we left off with verse 12 of John 15.

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

We talked a bit, at this past Wednesday’s Bible discussion, about that transition that Jesus indicates in verse 15. *“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, I have called you friends...”* There is this shift that’s taking place as Jesus is preparing these disciples to move from being a group of people following him as a leader throughout his journey and ministry into a place in which they venture forth into the world to carry that mission to even greater heights than they’d yet to even imagine. And, how is that going to happen? *“This is my commandment,”* Jesus say, *“that you love one another as I have loved you.”*

That’s the last piece of the puzzle that Jesus is building here. In chapter 13, the disciples grow confused and worried about what seems to be unfolding. In chapter 14, Jesus speaks to that worry and confusion by promising that he will be with them in and through the gift of the Spirit that is soon to come. Then, in chapter 15, he looks to the other side of the coin and explains that that connection will be maintained through their abiding with him. And, how does one abide

with him? They keep his commandments. And how do we keep his commandments? We love one another.

Now, remember where we started with all of this. We started by looking at verse 11. *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* That’s the ‘destination’ that Jesus is laying out here. To these worried and confused disciples, Jesus is laying out a roadmap to them that continues their connection to him in a way that their joy is brought to its fullness, and what he tells us is that that roadmap passes right through the journey of loving others. So, let’s recap one more time:

1. He will remain with us through the Spirit.
2. We remain with him by abiding in his love.
3. We abide in his love by keeping his commandments.
4. We keep his commandments by loving others.
5. And, it is in and through all of this that we find that promised joy of verse 11.

Now, I’m a sucker for a good police or FBI-type drama on television. And quite often, when watching one of these shows, it will appear as though they’ve caught the bad guy and everything is wrapping with a nice little bow, but then I look at the clock and realize there’s still 20 minutes left in the episode, so I know something else is still coming. That, I want to suggest, is precisely where we are with this message. Because, yes, Jesus is laying out a roadmap to those disciples that continues their connection to him in a way that their joy is brought to its fullness, and that roadmap passes right the journey of loving others, but I still don’t think we’re quite there!

Here’s the thing... how many times have you heard it said, or perhaps said yourself, that you/we benefit from helping others? ‘It feels good when I serve those meals,’ we might say, ‘It makes me happy to help people.’ Both of those are true, and there’s nothing wrong with that sensibility, but I think we run a risk if we reduced Jesus’ words here in John 15 to those momentary occasions. I think those moments of feeling good when helping another fall short of what Jesus is trying to get at here because neither the manner of loving the other nor the joy received measure up to that which Jesus is guiding us towards in John 15.

We’ll start with the ‘loving others’ side of things. In short, we have to look at all of what Jesus says here. *“This is my commandment,”* Jesus says in verse 12, *“That you love one another as I have loved you.”* This, of course, is not the only place that Jesus says this, and we’ve talked about it before, but there is a distinct difference between loving others and loving others as Jesus loved. And here, in John 15, he centers right in on that distinction. *“This is my commandment,”* Jesus says in verse 12, *“That you love one another as I have loved you.”* He then immediately continues, in verse 13, by saying, *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* We don’t have time, today, to talk about what this looks like in real-world ways, but there is a sacrificial, decentralizing of the self, nature of the love to which Jesus is calling us here that goes beyond the moment of helping someone out. Obviously, Jesus is not calling all of us to a literal death, but there is a humbling removal of the ego and self-centeredness of humanity that is central to the love that Jesus is laying out as the path to the completeness of his joy in us. This isn’t simply about giving a boost to someone less fortunate – this is about a perspective in life in which the other (particularly the less fortunate other) becomes the priority, even, at times, to our own detriment.

And, as for that joy, it is so much more than happiness. One of the things that unfolds for those emotions inside that young girl's head in the movie *Inside Out*, is this gradual understanding of the complexity and depth of the emotions that make up our being. Joy, it's discovered, is so much deeper than the 'glee' or 'delight' of the moment, and that's what we are talking about here. The word that we translate as joy here in John 15 isn't a glee that comes from some momentary occurrence, it is a deep and inner joy that is grounded in the wonders and blessings of God that are known and held in the hearts God's people. We're not talking about being glad or cheerful, we're talking about having the true joy of God stirring in the deepest parts of our inner being. We're not talking about the release of dopamine that comes from some moment of pleasantries, we're talking about the deeper joy of knowing that we are in God and that God is in us.

So, I know there's been a lot crammed into a very condensed stretch of time here, this morning, but try to bear with me as we put all of this together. To those confused and worried disciples, filled with angst over both that which has happened and that which they fear might be yet to come, Jesus not only promises that his presence will remain with them in the spirit, but lays out what comes next for them. And, as complex and wide-ranging as our reflections have been this morning, the path he lays before them is, in the end, pretty clear. If they abide in him by loving others with that sacrificial decentering of the self that is the heart of the cross, they will then and always know not just the blessing of the moment of serving the other, but the gift of God's deepest and fullest joy instilled in their hearts as they live out God's love for others as Jesus did for us.