

The St. John's Pulpit

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THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Gospel of John 15:9-11

Second Sunday of Easter, April 23, 2017

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(Note: This sermon was a dialogue presented by Rev. Caleb S. Foust and his father, Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD. Caleb serves as Minister with Youth and Missions for Emerywood Baptist Church in High Point, NC.)

DENNIS

Last Sunday, a woman in an electric wheel chair rolled up to her pastor following Easter worship and proclaimed, “*Didn’t we dance today!*”

We danced out of this sanctuary last Sunday. The Lord of the Dance guided us as we tiptoed out of the tomb past sleeping guards greeting Mary Magdalene in the morning dew of the garden and the announcement of NEW LIFE began to resonate into the world. The joy of Christian living was bright with hope as we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ and became witnesses of his light in the life of the world. We remembered that Easter is NOT a holiday; Easter is a Holy Day showing us how to live each and every day. For the Gospel, the Good News of God, has entered our lives. “*The Light has shined in the darkness and the darkness did not – has not – will not – cannot – overcome it.*”

Occasionally people will find out we are not a Southern Baptist Church. They ask me how it was that St. John’s handled the devastation of the Southern Baptist Convention in such healthy ways. My response includes three significant factors: First, through the decades, St. John’s has enjoyed clarity of a progressive theological identity and an inclusive theological mission. Second, this church has always chosen pastoral leaders who are reflective of this progressive theological identity and inclusive theological mission. And, third, the St. John’s Covenant was written and adopted in 1922. When the SBC adopted the Baptist Faith and Message in 1928 and in 1963, St. John’s chose to stay with the St. John’s Covenant. So, our

capacity to express local church autonomy was never set within the confines of any other document. We are free to partner with anyone for ministry; but we belong to God and God alone.

One of the covenant commitments of the St. John's Covenant is this: "***We will with God's help, so live our lives that others seeing THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN LIVING may seek to know Jesus Christ as Lord.***" For 95 years, we have been committed to THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN LIVING. But, this idea of joy surfaces some questions for us to ponder.

CALEB

What is Joy? What separates Joy from happiness? It's easy to confuse the 2 when we don't really think about it. There are most likely many times in life when we have been happy, but true joy is much harder to nail down. Happiness is an emotion that helps us get to joy, but Joy is a whole other state of being. I would say that when I graduated High School I was happy; when I received my Masters I experienced joy because (for the foreseeable future) I was done or when the Cubs win games, I am happy; when they win the World Series, I have tears of Joy. But if I'm honest with myself, all of these are times of happiness.

Happiness is an emotion in which you experience feelings ranging from satisfaction to bliss. Happiness is most often a product of some thing. Joy is a product of a connection to who God desires you to be at your innermost self. Joy comes from everything you already have. One thing that always seems to help me understand the differences between things is by looking at their opposites. The opposite of happiness is unhappiness...its being sad; the opposite of joy ...is fear.

DENNIS

And, fear is prevalent in our time. Some people spread fear like roaches spread germs. Yet, the resurrection of Jesus offers New Life that puts our fears in their place. We know The Living God is present with us in times of trouble and is working in all situations for good.

The Greeks gave us Tragedy and Comedy. In tragedy, egocentric arrogance leads to catastrophe. In comedy, there is also egocentric arrogance leading to catastrophe; but it becomes bearable because mysteriously, without clear explanation of all of the details, there is an ending that put things right. All blunders become straightened out. 'All things work together for good.'

In an interview on the nature of creativity, an artist observed, *“If you know what you are looking for, you will never see what you do not expect to find.”* God appears to you in unexpected people, at unexpected times in unsuspecting places.

On those first days following the resurrection, it was as if the followers of Jesus were awakening to a new understanding of The Living God. They were realizing that every tragedy can be transformed by God to become a comedy. Our tears are transformed into laughter. The Man of Sorrows is also the Man of Joyful Laughter. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus told his followers, *“These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.”* Yet, a few days later, they were filled with fear.

CALEB

This is the first Sunday after or the Second Sunday of Easter. I can't help but think of the emotions of the disciples from the lectionary text today. John tells us that the doors at the house where the disciples were meeting were locked out of fear and Jesus appeared among them and tells them rejoice peace be with you. He says, y'all don't be afraid, be the church. Be the carriers of Joy for those who know not what they are missing. Be the bringers of joy for those who are struggling to make it to the next day. Forgive sins in my name and they are forgiven. This is a good reminder that the Christian life; keeping Christ's commandments are not as much about following rules but more about living life in a way that draws others into the joy of a life resurrected. The fearful life is about avoiding punishment. Living a life of Joy is about celebrating and sharing resurrection and forgiveness.

Living a joyful life however doesn't mean that you'll never be sad again it means you don't have to be crippled by a fear of what might come. A few months ago, a high school senior in our church died in a fire at their home. Abby was a bright light. We continue to grieve her loss. We continue to care for her family and one another.

I have watched in amazement over the last few months as the congregation I serve has picked up and been the carriers of joy for a family crawling through grief. I have seen that church is at its best when we pick each other up, walk together, and carry joy for and to one another.

DENNIS

Do not fear beloved; there is One smarter than you who is going before you to make a way. And this way is what we know as The Way of Jesus. Some people may laugh at us from time to time. Yet, we are encouraged by their laughter. For, in 1 Corinthians 4:10, we find these words: “...*we are fools for Christ.*” The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

So, “***We will with God’s help, so live our lives that others seeing THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN LIVING may seek to know Jesus Christ as Lord.***” Amen and AMEN!

BENEDICTION

“*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.*”

SHALOM!

A WORD ABOUT JOY SUNDAY (A Special Day of Celebration on the Sunday after Easter)

One day the comedian, Groucho Marx, was walking through a hotel lobby when a clergyman wearing his collar crossed his path. The clergyman extended his arm and the men shook hands. The clergyman said, “*I want to thank you for all the joy you have added to the world.*” Groucho replied, “*Thank you Reverend. And I want to thank you for all the joy you’ve taken out of it.*”

Today, we join a growing number of congregations celebrating Joy Sunday – also called ‘Bright Sunday,’ and ‘Holy Humor Sunday.’ This custom began among the Greeks of the fourth century. Theologians of that century, Augustine, John Chrysostym and Gregory of Nyssa taught that The Living God played a joke on the devil by raising Jesus from death and the grave. One fourth century theologian had a dream that the resurrected Jesus crossed paths with the devil. As the devil stared at Jesus in amazement, bewilderment and disbelief, Jesus just threw back his head and laughed. So, these theologians initiated the phrase, ‘the Easter laugh,’ emphasizing that in his ministry at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and in a variety of large dinners, Jesus was a person who enjoyed laughing and having a good time.

Following the resurrection, Jesus became the life of the party. In those early centuries, the tradition developed for Easter Week to be a continuous feast. In recent decades, this tradition has been resurrected. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes about ‘*Easter as the season for the laughing of the redeemed and the dancing of the liberated.*’

We can thank the Puritans for beginning traditions deemphasizing joy. They only wore black or navy blue on Sundays and refused to play, dance, whistle, laugh or smile on the Lord’s Day. Thanks be to God, that’s over! And all God’s people say, Amen!