

Sermon Title: What Makes Joy Complete?
Text: Psalm 1; John 17:6-21

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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Kathleen Norris is the author of several good, and helpful books on Christian Spirituality. One of them is entitled *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.¹ In it she takes on what she identifies as the “scary words” that fill the landscape of our faith. I was reminded of that book as I read our Gospel lesson for this morning—and in fact the whole set of readings we’ve shared throughout this Eastertide from the Gospel of John. There’s no particular reason you would have noticed it, as our worship and preaching for the past month has been more shaped by the events and occasions of our life together, and not really focused on the Gospel readings, but they’ve been drawn from five chapters from John that are unique to his telling of Jesus’ story. It’s a long sermon and prayer that is set in the Upper Room, on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, where Matthew, Mark and Luke have instead their account of the Last Supper.

Ask anyone who’s served as a reader in the last couple of weeks, however, and they’ll tell you that there’s nothing *simple* about the language. The structure of the sentences is convoluted, and the vocabulary is just chocked full of those “scary words” that Norris talks about. In our lesson for this morning, you’ve got to listen carefully, and even if you’re listening it’s so easy to get tripped up. “I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.” “All mine are yours and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.” “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” “Sanctify them in truth; your Word is the truth.” “I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...” Yikes! Sanctification and glorification, yours, mine, ours. Just diagramming the sentences is enough to give you a headache, without even beginning to understand what they *mean!*

We *could* at this point roll up our sleeves, get out the dictionaries and grammars, and wrestle this text to the ground—dig in up to our elbows, and see what’s planted in the midst of this thicket—but you’ll be relieved to know that I don’t think it would be particularly helpful to even attempt it this morning. More to the point, I really don’t think it’s the purpose of the few minutes we spend together on Sunday mornings under the guise of a sermon. That’s what Bible *Study* is for—which begs the question of when we as a congregation do *that* together, but that was a sermon for a couple of weeks ago. Necessary? From the depths of my pastor’s soul I say, “Yes!” But it is *neither* the proper nor effective use of the time we’ve got together right now. All I really want to do as far as all this is concerned is to ever so gently lay down a marker, to remind us that the Bible that lies at the center of our faith is *not* a clean, simple text—an “idiot’s guide to living” that you can open to any page for clear instructions on life. It’s a hard book—even scary—and sometimes you have to work hard to understand it. Sometimes you just want to throw it out the window and be done with it. But at the end of the day, it’s the book we’ve got, to tell us about ourselves, and God, and the world in which we find ourselves. Not necessarily what you want to hear, or I want to say, on a beautiful Holiday weekend, when our minds would rather focus on

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998.

our gardens, and barbecues, and a much deserved day off with family. But I'd be less than honest if I didn't at least lay that marker in its place.

So what *do* you do with this jumble of nouns, and verbs, and adverbs and prepositions that bundles itself together as our Gospel lesson for this morning? *One* way of dealing with the complexity, which in no way detracts from any other way, is to listen for a word or phrase that catches your imagination, or resonates with your soul's workings. *Lectio Divina* is the name that this approach to Scripture was given when it evolved in monastic practice, and again, it is not a replacement for either serious critical study *or* sermon, but it does, sometimes, draw you to a aspect of the text that you might otherwise breeze past. It's something I do in a very informal way with the lectionary readings most weeks, and as I was looking toward this Sunday, it led me to one verse in the middle of the jumble, that seemed, quite frankly, out of context. It's the 13th verse, and it reads like this: "Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves."

The sentence itself is something of a linguistic jumble, but two aspects held my heart as I made my way to this morning. The first seems so obvious, but can be so easily shifted to the bottom of my desk, as I find myself buried in the business of the church: what God hopes for this world, what Christ prayed for to the last for his disciples, and for those who would "come to believe through them" is *Joy!* Now that's not a scary word at all, is it? *Joy!* It's not *righteousness*, or *sanctification*, or any of those scary words that lies at the end of this rainbow that we chase, but *Joy*. And in the earlier part of this long sermon and prayer, Jesus comes as close to a definition of the word as he comes to any word, as he speaks to his disciples of what they're about to live through, and how it's like a woman who is about to give birth, but then assures them that what awaits them is that indescribable feeling when you hold that new life in your arms for the first time, and feel its fresh breath on your skin. *That's joy!* And it's what God has in mind for us. It is the *telos*—the end and fulfillment of all we do, and talk about, and fret over as people of God. Of course there is heavy labor to be done between here and there, but if we're doing it right, it should be sprinkled with joy.

That's a good reminder for those of us who tend to take things very seriously, indeed. Maybe even a warrant for things like Summer vacations, and taking a day off every now and then, just to smell the roses...and I hear your Pastor's family whispering, "physician, heal thyself!" It's worth a minute's ponder on this gorgeous holiday weekend, isn't it? What joy have we simply run past, or through, or over, because we were so intent on all the things that simply *had* to be done? Because it just might be that the very thing we rushed past was the whole reason for the journey. There's supposed to be something about it all that is as pure, and simple, and blissful as last Sunday, when, after I'd done everything imaginable to make her cry, I walked with little Karrina up and down the aisle, and John Stevenson gently touched her face. If there are not enough of those moments in our life together, then we're doing something wrong.

But in fact, it goes even one step further than that. Because it's not just that we might find joy, but that the joy of Christ might be *completed* in us. That's the second aspect of this maze of a text that caught my Spirit, because as I thought and prayed my way through to this morning, I wondered just what it might be that would make a joy *complete*. And in the midst of that musing, I stumbled on an article by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, a wonderfully sensitive writer

and Professor of Literature whose poetry makes it, every year, into our Maundy Thursday worship bulletin. The title of the article was “In Praise of Incompletion”.² You can see how my contrarian mind was tugged.

In the article, McEntyre challenges what I would characterize as a core value of the Protestant ethic: *finish* what you’ve begun. Whether it’s peas on a plate, or books on the nightstand, we’re programmed, in no small part by our reading of the Gospel, to be the “little engine that could.” “Finish what you start”, she writes, “may seem to be, and often is, good advice. But like most general maxims, it can be a trap, and its misapplication can be costly, sometimes deadly, and curiously self-deceptive.” And she goes on, in her own gentle way, to speak of the “value of incompletions in everyday life.”

There’s one paragraph that spoke to me, specifically, because it reminded me of that short walk I took last week with Karinna. Bear with me, because McEntyre says it better than I could summarize it:

Anyone who has taken walks with young children knows that getting there is not the point. They stop and squat down. They smell the plants. They laugh at dog poop. They pick up bugs. They drop the pebble they’ve been carrying, start to look for it, and find a feather instead. The feather turns out to be so satisfactory they forget about the pebble. And where you end up, which may or may not be where you thought you were going, turns out to be the place you were going all the time.

Goal-oriented adults have to work hard to retrieve the habits of mind and heart I’m describing—the unselfconscious playfulness that will stop over anything and take interest; the openness to noticing the random and irrelevant—indeed to retrieve the basic attitude that nothing is random or irrelevant.³

It was as I read those words in praise of *incompletion* that I began to wonder if that wasn’t precisely what Jesus had in mind as the *completion* of our joy. I wondered whether it wasn’t the case that all the other things we chase so mightily in this world—fortune, fame, the newest toy, destination, the biggest house—all the things we *imagine* to be the source of our joy are, in fact, the things that prevent us from finding that for which we long?

The key to it all is in the very strange verb that rests at the center of this tangled sentence: “that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” For the linguists among you, the conjugation of the verb is perfect passive accusative. It’s something that’s over and done (perfect) it’s done for us (accusative) and there’s nothing about it over which we have any control (passive.) That’s the way our joy is *made complete*—it is, in short, a gift that can finally only be ours if we open our arms, and receive it!

That’s an interesting thought for a Memorial Day weekend, isn’t it? That the real joy we seek in this world comes to us as we abandon our striving for all the substitute joys, and quick fixes that

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, “In Praise of Incompletion”, *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, 20:4 (July/August 2005) pp. 38-44.

³ *Ibid.* p. 42.

we place in its way. It's not something that we can plan for, or save for, or make our own by taking it from someone else. We won't reach it by climbing over each other, or gorging ourselves on its saccharine substitutes. We will *only* know this joy as we learn to let go of all the other things that hold *us*, and allow God's fullness to become our own.

To paraphrase Augustine, our joy will only be complete when it finds its completion in the Lord. Maybe I should let Marilyn McEntyre have the last word:

Those of us in midlife who are old enough to have seen friends, elders, and children die what seems untimely deaths know that "mid" is a very approximate idea. We don't know how near the end we are, or how near the beginning. Jesus' admonition to be like little children, like the Buddhist practice of cultivating a "beginner's mind," emphasizes that we are always at the point of beginning and unknowing, and must consider each day what learning and what fresh gifts are available. Beginning is a state of readiness, awareness, receptiveness, and openheartedness. In that state, whatever gift is offered in the moment or the process may be received. Finishing is beside the point."⁴

And, dare I add, whatever is offered, in the moment or in the process, will turn out to be the completion of our joy!

Let us pray.

⁴ Ibid. p. 44.