

Scripture Reading:
John 15:9-17

They Will Know We are Christians By Our Love

Jesus centres life in love. It is the foundation of all of his life, teachings and discipleship. The word love is repeated nine times here in only eight verses. There is no way to escape the message and theme. This passage is a beautiful reminder of the love God has for us, how Jesus lived out that love and how we are called to live into and through it in our faith today.

This is Jesus' last message to his disciples and he wants them to hear it so clearly. He bares his heart and soul to them and reminds them that he chose them, they didn't chose him. He reminds them that he has shown and lived for them every step of the way deep, authentic, God given love. The source of a love like that comes from God Jesus reminds them "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

Last week we were reminded that if we abide in that love and remain in that love we will know peace and joy. It is as we are connected like a branch of the vine to the holy that we abide in holy love which Jesus says will fill us. Jesus says "if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." It seems to me if we abide in Gods love and care it will be a lot easier to keep God's commandments.

Katerina Whitley writes "Keeping God's commandments presupposes obedience, and this is something our culture rejects... Obedience is for the weak, not the strong. Knowing how we react to obedience, Jesus keeps referring to himself. His life was one of total obedience to the Father. And no one who knows the story can ever call Jesus weak.

Jesus obeyed. He kept in constant connection with his father through prayer, through loving communion. Even when he was abandoned in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, he remained in obedience to the will of the Father. The cup was not taken away; it was drunk to the bitter dregs. And still he obeyed, because he knew that, despite everything, the Father loved him."¹

And yet this love and joy that Jesus speaks of seems almost out of place in these passages, and it certainly seems out of place in today's world. Karoline Lewis wrote in her commentary this week "Nepal, Baltimore, school shootings, cancer, suicide, poverty, discrimination, apathy, violence, ignorance, spite, abuse, injustice. Some days it's just too much for my little heart."

¹ Love one another BY KATERINA K. WHITLEY

This was a Facebook post this week by a working preacher I know. I would add to the list sexism, anxiety, broken relationships, and sorrow. I would add disillusionment, distrust, depression, and disregard... Lewis continues It's been that kind of week. It's been that kind of time. It's been that kind of world. Which makes Jesus' words of joy seem out of place. Out of sync. Out of touch with reality. "Seriously, Jesus. Are you kidding me?"

What is joy doing here and now in a time and place like this? I have a feeling the disciples asked the same questions. After all, here they are in the middle of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' parting words to his disciples, and it's here and now in Jesus' ministry that Jesus offers statements of joy. There's already been the acknowledgement of troubled hearts. And the next chapters will be words about rejection and hatred and abandonment, yet even more joy, "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete" (16:24); And later "But 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" (John 17:13).

Joy appears misplaced in passages that deal primarily with Jesus' departure and impending death. Joy seems inappropriate when you are told that the one on whom you have relied for intimacy and belonging will no longer be around. Joy is a marked juxtaposition to the realities that the disciples face -- that we face. And maybe that's the point. Because where is joy in the midst of the hardship Jesus described and in the peril that is sure to come? Where is joy when a primary source of your joy is leaving you? Where is joy when you need it the most? Jesus knows that the presence of joy needs to be heard, needs to be felt, when you face things that assume and anticipate a profound absence of joy."²

Joy is not abstract happiness. Joy is elusive. True joy is hard to come by and seems simply impossible when one starts down the road of real life. I know I have struggled with Joy many times. In one season of my life just out of my own personal growth desires I did a study on Joy. I studied the scriptures and read them over and over, I prayed without ceasing for that joy to fill me. I studied the psychology and science of joy because I just wanted it so badly. I have come to realize that joy and happiness are not the same. I desire a contented joy now and I know when I am loosing it that it is time to check my 'abiding in God's love.' Joy is both a gift and it is hard work. Joy is a choice one makes and often a choice one makes over and over again. Oh it is true that some come by it more easily or naturally than others but I would dare to suggest that even those who appear to live in constant joy choose that road.

I long for this church and congregation to be a place where people experience the love of God through our community in such a way that they will experience inexplicable joy.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3608>

You see we make the choice as individuals, but it is also commanded us. For as we live and obey the commandments we will know and experience great love and joy. What matters to Jesus is how we treat one another. We can follow all the laws and rituals and traditions we want but if they do not lead us to living and being love that we have missed the point. Remember obedience to God's commandments bears fruit and the first fruit of abiding in love is that we have joy. The joy of knowing we are loved by God in Christ – not some easily earned emotion, but a state of being. Joy comes from the conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We will all have times of struggle. Some of us are struggling at this time with a variety of things, personal family relationships and hurts, illness, depression. Some of us are beginning to grieve the loss of the way this church has always been. We know we are not closing our doors but we are concerned about how we will remain together, how we will survive and what we will look like if we do. Grief and loss and struggle are real and they are okay and yet we are promised by the holy that we are not alone in the process, God has not abandoned us, God has not stopped caring for us. We can choose how we live into the next weeks. Grieving our losses and looking forward in hope and joy.

Whitley writes ““And I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last,” Jesus tells his disciples. A few years later, Paul will list the fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians. These are the conclusions of a man who had suffered immeasurably because of his love for Christ. And yet because he knew that he was one with Christ, abiding in his love, the fruits that resulted are these: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Such attributes are not earned, they are not taught; they spring from abiding in Christ's love – otherwise, a man who had suffered so unjustly would have been filled with bitterness. But Paul was not.

The verses we are studying today, focused as they are on love and obedience to God's commandments are not meant only for the disciples, for those who were Jesus' friends. They are meant for us also. We have not been left out in the cold. The great Epiphany came to Peter during his visit to the gentiles of Caesarea, in the house of Cornelius. After Peter preached a sermon on the meaning of the Good News, the Holy Spirit visited all those who were present, not just the Jews but also the gentiles. They were astounded, the writer tells us, that the Holy Spirit descended on them also.”³

This is why John in the next chapter states “They will know they are my disciples by their love.” The early Christians were known for loving one another. In this time and place, in this transition, even in this sorrow we too are called to abide in God's love. May we abide in such a way that people all around us may experience Christ's love through us. They will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.

³ Whitley

