**John 15:11-19** May 9, 2021

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*John 15:9[Jesus said,] “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command. 15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**That Your Joy May Be Complete**

“Happily ever after.” That’s how stories are supposed to end. Now, some people will say, “That’s so boring!” That’s what some people will say. Maybe even you say it. In a sense, it is true. The part we pay for in the movie, the book, is the not-so-happy part of the story. When you hear “happily ever after,” you know it’s time to close the book. Time to change the channel. We want to hear about the problem, the scandal, the injustice. A movie about a happy life is not going to sell a lot of tickets. There has to be a problem. Maybe that’s why the news is all bad: bad stuff sells. If someone were to start the seven thousandth cable entertainment channel, “HEAC-TV – The Happily Ever After Channel,” it would have a shorter life than a June bug in a chicken run. The Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, drew people into one of his masterpieces with this opening line. He wrote, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” He admits he couldn’t sell a book unless it involves a great deal of unhappiness.

On the other hand, if it’s *my* life, I want the happily ever after version. That’s not to say I don’t want excitement; what I don’t want is problems. And maybe more than I want happiness for my own life, and you want it for yours, mothers want it for their children. The plans start early, even before birth. The cute clothes, the how-to-parent books, plans for the room, plans for the first day of school, etc. A mother will sit there (the few times mothers have to just sit there) and she casts her mind into the future and she sees her child smiling through all the scenes of life. That’s her hope; her plan; her, in the fullest sense, her dream. She lives for it!

Desiring other people’s happiness is a good thing. But every mother also realizes that happiness is not enough. Happiness is not sturdy enough to stand up to the winds of life. Like flowers, happiness is crushed by bullies. When the call comes in the middle of the night, when the manager hands out the pink slip, when people act like, well, people, happiness cries out “Why? What? How?” and then happiness dies. And so mothers realize that there are deeper things to instill in their children. That deeper feeling mothers want their children to have is called “joy.” If happiness is a spring flower, beautiful for a moment, joy is a hibernating polar bear. The landscape is bleak and dark, windy and cold, but life persists. It insists on persisting. It lives in spite of all that surrounds it, and it is strong. This is joy. So, while mother does all she can to give happiness—and she rightly prays for it—she realizes that there is a more serious work in imparting joy.

There is a very natural comparison between that and what is going on in today’s sermon reading. In John chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 Jesus speaks at great length to his disciples in his last evening with them. It is his last major teaching session. You see, come morning, at 9:00am, he is going to start dying on a cross. These are his last words. This is it. So he gets them ready for what the world is going to throw at them. He wants them to have joy.

Of these final five chapters of teaching, our reading is the middle. The way *we* usually present things, that means “lost in the middle.” We usually put the key thought at the beginning or at the end. But a tried and true Hebrew teaching method is to put the most important thought in the center (see Borchert, 73). So in our reading, what we have is not some muddle in the middle, but really the core of what Jesus wants his disciples to remember after he leaves them. Like a mother who will say much to her children, but who hopes that in the end, if nothing else, they will remember one or two key things that “mom always said”—in the same way Jesus here presents the core of what it is all about. ***“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”***

Everything was for their joy. Isn’t that marvelous! You see, Jesus’ desire for his people of all times is to have joy. All that Jesus did and said is not for our *happiness*. No, he was very open about that. We might have happy days, sometimes. But Jesus told them and us that some would betray him. He said that out in the world, the world would hate them and us and persecute and imprison. To survive that and much worse, they and we need something sturdier than happiness. Jesus instructed them in joy.

If Jesus’ goal for us is joy, a joy that keeps coursing through our veins through the darkest night, how do we get that?

Now, the first thing we need to be clear about is what Jesus is not talking about. This is not about being saved. This is not stepping over the threshold between unbelief and faith, from damnation to salvation, from spiritual death to life. This is not about coming to faith. Jesus is talking about the ongoing life of his believers. How do Christians ***“remain in [Jesus’] love?”*** How does their joy become ***“complete?”*** How do we have Christian joy in the middle of all the things that go on around us? How do we continue in that joy through years that have a way of wearing us down, of making the old joys bland and washed out?

What do you think the secret is? I’ll bet you money your answer is not Jesus’ answer! You ready? Jesus told them: ***“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love… I have told you this so that your joy may be complete.”*** Jesus’ secret to a joyful Christian life is obedience.

That’s not where we would have gone first, is it? Our answers are: find yourself. Pursue your passion. Be authentic. Do you hear how self-centered those are? Obedience is centered on someone else. Obedience is not something we associate with joy or love, or anything like that for that matter. Our minds have played a great and terrible trick on us, even on us Christians. We have come to equate obedience with miserable servitude and cruel slavery. We have come to think of Jesus’ words as the very opposite of joy and love. Our ideas of joy run with the notions of freedom from restraint and pursuit of happiness. Obeying Jesus’ commands does not sound like the path to joy.

But Jesus insists on it. The joy he gives is not found in total personal liberty. It is not about what works for me. It is not found in less than half-hearted devotion to him and his word while I spend my time and the energy on the here and now. His word is to be the ruling and directing force in our lives. And obedience is blessed.

God has designed things that when we obey his commands for life, blessings *naturally* follow. One example: Do you know what would raise educational standards, lower crime rates and drug addiction rates, raise incomes, improve mental health more than any one other thing? If people would just honor marriage as the Sixth Commandment teaches. The research proves this. Sure, we would still live in a sinful, fallen world with real problems, but so much suffering would be avoided. Obey and be blessed!

On top of that God has promised to add his own divine blessings to those who honor him. Not only will you have the *natural* results of obeying commandments that are optimized for God’s creation, but when we obey God because he is our God and Savior, he will add supernatural blessings. He promises that all things work for the good of those who love him.

With those blessings promised to those who obey him, with Jesus’ advice, ***“I have told you this so that… that your joy may be complete,”*** why would anyone not obey God’s commands? Except pure spite, except to cut off your nose to spite your face. And people will do it. All of God’s blessings promised to them, and they will insist that they want to have the freedom to do things their way. In so doing, they reject their Savior and choose for themselves damnation. Oh, *“the [human] heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9)

In proof that obedience is not slavery, Jesus pointed to himself. ***“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”*** Speaking from the perspective of his human nature, what connected Jesus to the Father was his obedience. If he hadn’t obeyed God the Father (which is unimaginable) he would not have truly loved God the Father, and he would have been removed from that love. But, of course, he did obey and he remained in his love.

And it wasn’t obedience for obedience’s sake. Neither is ours. Our obedience has, in a sense, the same well-defined focus as Jesus’ life of obedience ***“Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”*** In his own life, Jesus’ obedience had the point of serving others. Of course, as the Savior of humanity, he served others in a way that we never can. But there is something about his obedience which is very much like our obedience. ***“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”*** To explain to his disciples one last time what it means to obey God, he didn’t need to spend the night repeating all of the commands that he had spoken. Over three years Jesus had talked at some length about all kinds of things: honesty, morality, marriage, violence, anger, lying, even taxes. But when it comes right down to it, he could sum it all up in one command. It really is about serving the good of others, ***“Love each other as I have loved you.”***

Oh, how infrequently I do this. It isn’t too difficult to give the excess to others. A few extra minutes, a couple extra dollars that I really don’t need. But to actually go to a trouble for others? My, how my nature feels put upon. How unreasonable it is that I should take trouble for people don’t take care of themselves! Why should I step in and do something for them, give up something for them?

When I start thinking like that, oh, how far I have wandered from our Lord Jesus’ self-giving life for us. Lord, forgive me for the many times that I have not counted obedience to you and love for other people my highest privilege and joy! And forgive he does. Forgive he does, in the One who lived not himself, but for all.

The follower of Christ is called not to freedom to do what we want, but to service to God and others. At just this point that Jesus assured his doubtful followers gathered around him in the upper room that obeying his commands is where they will find joy. He promised them, ***“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love… I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”***

Which is not what my selfish sinful nature wanted to hear. Yet when I stop and realize that Christ’s great joy throughout his life was to live for me, every moment, then I start to realize that Jesus is right. I realize the truth that one of those gathered around that table for Jesus’ last supper would later write in 1 Peter 1:8-9 *“Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him… you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*