

Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversation

Today: Joy in You

Text: John 15:1-11

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, July 19, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

In the interest of self-disclosure, this week I chose to revise a sermon some of you have heard before. I did so because after the events of our week, I needed to hear its message again. You see, this week, we got some bad news. The current regimen of treatment my wife has been on for the treatment of her cancer has stopped working, and we need to move to a more experimental treatment called a “clinical trial.” This will be the ninth different regimen of treatment Cherie has received since her diagnosis 5 ½ years ago.

On the way home from Fox Chase I told Cherie how much I admired her courage; how I wasn’t sure if I could take the disappointments she has had to face in the last five years. Her response will tell you something about the kind of woman she is. She said, *“I love life, and it doesn’t seem all that courageous to me to want to live for as long as I can while I am still feeling pretty healthy.”*

Those of you who know Cherie know that she has a smile that will brighten any room, and a laugh that is contagious. She is one who finds incredible joy in living. The doctors at Fox Chase Cancer Center are astounded that she has done so well in her treatment for the last 5 ½ years. They are scientists, and what they cannot measure is the positive impact of her attitude and the power of prayer when it comes to the treatment of her disease. So for her and people like her in our congregation, I wanted to revisit this text today as a personal testimony to those who

have been my teachers when it comes to understanding JOY. It focuses on the eleventh verse of John 15: *“I have said these things that my joy should be in you and your joy may be complete.”*

A colleague of mine once asked this question of his congregation in his column in the church newsletter, *“Do you have the courage to be happy?”* It may sound like a foolish question since it implies that happiness is a choice, and given the choice, who among us would not choose to be happy? However, my colleague believed that there are many people who may actually choose unhappiness as a way of life.

Those of us in helping professions will tell you that life is full of a variety of catastrophes which are simply a part of what it means to be human. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. There is no rhyme or reason to it sometimes. It is simply the way life is.

What continues to be amazing to me is the way in which people deal with the tragedies which life brings our way. For example, why is it, when faced with the same crisis in human life, one person will see a disaster and another person will see an opportunity? Why do some people see the glass half full and others see it as half empty?

Medical science has been interested in the impact of emotions on health for nearly three decades. Much of their research began in the early 1980's when the prestigious literary figure, Norman Cousins, decided to check himself out of a hospital and into a hotel room after his doctors had told him that his condition was terminal and there was nothing they could do. He began taking high doses of Vitamin C and exposing himself to equally high doses of humor. He rented old movies like the Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and Abbot and Costello, read books that were humorous and visited with friends who brought him joy. In the midst of this regimen,

Cousins discovered that ten minutes of solid belly laughter gave him two hours of pain-free sleep.

As physicians explored this dynamic further, they found that laughter stimulates the production of endoenzymes which are morphine-like pain killers which our bodies produce naturally. In short, physicians discovered that laughter reduces pain and helps people to get well. Cousins lived for another ten years with his “terminal condition” before he died in 1990, and today the Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology at University of California, Los Angeles continues to study the effect of our emotions on our physical well-being.

Set this finding against the backdrop of our scripture for today. ***These things I have spoken to you that MY JOY may be in you and that YOUR JOY may be full.*** If this is true, then it follows that one of the benchmarks of knowing that we have allowed Jesus Christ to be part of our lives will be our measure of JOY. But how does one find joy in the face of the difficult circumstances which life often brings our way?

Jesus did not talk about happiness. He talked about JOY. For the Christian, happiness is easier to choose if it is rooted in the One who brings you JOY. The Christian faith is not a long list of rules and regulations which squeeze all the fun out of life. I would not be a Christian today if it meant that I had to go around gloomy all the time. God save me from that.

Teilhard de Chardin once said, “*Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.*” Do you remember the first question in the Westminster Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer: “*The chief end of man is to glorify God and ENJOY HIM forever.*”

Let me be clear: There are some things which are part of the human condition that ought to be the source of great sadness. Whether it is terrorist attacks, tornadoes, or tsunamis--anything which causes the massive loss of life ought to make us sad. The plight of children in third world

countries who don't have enough to eat ought to make us sad. To be a Christian means to identify with the plight of the human condition, and that is bound to make us sad.

However, sadness is not a virtue for the Christian, either. If God is at the center of our life and being, joy will be the inevitable outcome no matter what our circumstance. Very simply stated, if there is no joy in your life, then you have missed the good news which Jesus came to bring.

If you are one who is having trouble experiencing the joy that Jesus said he came to bring, let me spend a few moments suggesting some key ingredients of JOY that may help. To do so, I want to use the acronym **S.M.I.L.E.** (Smile). I know it may seem corny, but it also may help you to remember it.

“S” is for SIMPLIFY

Any of us who have moved recently know how much stuff we accumulate; even when we are committed to live simply. We moved to the city a year ago, and we were astounded at the amount of stuff we had been hanging onto that once had meaning in our lives but no longer served a useful purpose. For example, we had five storage tubs full of photographs that my mother had not been able to part with because they meant something to her, but Cherie put her foot down and said they are not coming to our new home. So I asked our children and our nieces and nephews if they wanted the photos, and to my surprise, they did. Now they have inherited my mother's stuff, and we don't feel guilty.

The same is true in our emotional lives, as well. Too many of us carry around sets of emotional baggage in our lives which keep us from experiencing the JOY God wants us to experience in Jesus Christ. There are hurt feelings over here, a grudge or two over there,

negative self-images from our teenage past down here. Before long we cannot move. We are weighed down with all this excess baggage and we are stuck.

A friend of mine reflected on an experience he had not long ago when he took the Circle Line Tour around New York City on a tour boat. It had been raining just before the boat left the dock, but then the sun came out for a beautiful day. He said he witnessed a man take off his shoes and hang his socks on the railing so that they could dry. Then a gust of wind came and blew one of the socks overboard. The man who had placed the socks there got up calmly, went to the railing, and threw the other sock into the river.

When my friend saw what he did and wrote about it. He said, *“If the same thing had happened to me, I would have probably been there cursing my bad luck, and I would probably have taken the other sock and stuffed it in my pocket and taken it home and put it in a drawer somewhere. That is the problem with my life. I have a whole drawer full of single socks that will never find a mate, and yet I can’t bring myself to throw away a perfectly good sock. In fact, my life is full of single sock experiences: things that are not necessarily bad. They are just USELESS! My life is full of things that once served a purpose but are no longer useful, and I can’t bring myself to clear them away so I can focus on what is really important.”*

“S” is for Simplify and “M” is for Mission

Do you know what the mission of your life is and how you want to fulfill it? Steven Covey, the author of Seven Habits of Highly Successful People says that people who are successful have a sense of where they want to end up before they start a project. It is only when we know where we want to be that we will recognize where we are when we get there. Or, as one of our elders is fond of reminding me, “Those who aim at nothing usually hit it.”

God has a mission for each of us. People who find joy in living know how to prioritize what is important in their lives and let go of the extraneous things which distract us. It is only when we take time to discern what our God-given mission is in life that we receive the joy of knowing we are fulfilling it. We may get there through our vocations. Perhaps it will be through our volunteer activities. I hope it will be by using your God-given gifts in the ministry of this church. Surely our families need to be a key part of the equation. Only as we take the time to discern our God-given mission in life that we will know the joy there is in fulfilling it.

“S” is for Simplify and “M” is for Mission “I” is for Identity

Where do you turn to receive your identity? In a world of competing allegiances, how do you define yourself?

Most of my contact with young adults these days is in the realm of premarital preparation, and what I see disturbs me. The tide may be shifting, but I fear for a generation of people who have defined themselves not by who they are but by what they have. I usually ask a question something like this: *“Where do you see yourselves five years from now?”* The answers are revealing. I ask the question to get them to think about their relationship, but the answer almost universally comes in the form of how much money they hope to be making or whether or not they will be able to afford a home of their own. Rarely do they talk about the quality of their relationship, or the kinds of commitments they hope to make to family, church, and community.

We have raised a generation of young people who have bought into a materialistic culture which has communicated the message “You are what you own.” Thank God for those who have responded to a Christian message which says: *“We are more than the sum total of our possessions. I am valuable because God has paid a price in Jesus Christ so that I might know my ultimate worth.”*

What is the source of your identity? In this time of economic downturn do you define yourself by what you own, or is there something more to you than the sum total of your possessions?

“S” is for Simplify and “M” is for Mission. “I” is for Identity. “L” is for Love

Each of us has a desperate need to be loved. From the earliest cries of the infant to the muffled tears of the elderly, the plea is simple: “Love me for who I am.”

We live in a country where nearly 50% of all marriages end in divorce. People move from relationship to relationship hoping against hope that someone will see them for who they are and love them because of who they are and in spite of whom they are. When will we learn?

The message we celebrate as Christians is God’s unconditional love. Jesus said: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.” Is the love of God at the center of who you perceive yourself to be?

Friday morning we held a memorial service for Kate Shirk who embodied the love of God for me and many others. Her son-in-law sang a song I had never heard before; a song written by a man who was near suicide and in a moment of desperation accepted that he had been looking for love in all the wrong places and embraced the love of God. The song is written as if God were singing it to us. (www.studiooneproductions.co.uk/i_will_always_love_you.htm)

I loved you long before you met me
And then you gave your life to me
But should one day you turn and walk away

CHORUS

I will always love you
I will always love you
I will always love you
Yes I will, I always will

The love on which all other definitions of love is based is the Love which God has shown us in Jesus Christ. Let that love be the center of your life.

“S” is for Simplify and “M” is for Mission “I” is for Identity “L” is for Love

“E” is for Enthusiasm

Where did we get that concept that being faithful means controlling our emotions, wearing long faces, and telling each other how much we have suffered? Remember that first

answer of the Westminster Catechism? “The chief end of man is to love God and ENJOY him forever.” When we enjoy something, we get enthusiastic about it.

Today is the last show at the Fulton of Les Miserables, and what a show it is. It is a wonderful performance; absolutely Broadway quality and a true delight. Cherie and I saw it on opening night about 6 weeks ago, but Clem Lichty tells me that when the cast comes out to take their bows, no one wants to stay in their seats. The response of the audience was worthy of the performance: a standing ovation.

You know when someone is enthusiastic about something, don’t you? When you are at a restaurant where the food is superb, do the people at the table eat in silence? Of course not! They rave about the food. I have yet to meet a fellow lover of Jan Karon’s novels about the little town of Mitford, North Carolina who does not go on and on about the characters. When you are at a baseball game and someone hits a home run over the right field fence, do people sit there in silence? Of course not! There is something in us that wants to be enthusiastic about everything else but the greatest thing in the world: God’s gift of unconditional love in the birth of Jesus.

“S” is for Simplify and “M” is for Mission “I” is for Identity “L” is for Love

“E” is for Enthusiasm

Jesus said, *“I have come that my JOY should be in you and YOUR JOY should be full.”*

The message for today is this: If you are having trouble experiencing the JOY that God longs to give you, maybe you should start with S.M.I.L.E