

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Joy

Sixth in a Series of Ten Sermons

July 26, 2020

8th Sunday after Pentecost

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Psalm 126:3 -God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people.

Ezra 6:22 - And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful...

Philippians 4 - Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

Matthew 13: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.

Dear Friends in Christ,

- Six weeks ago - set your hearts on pilgrimage
- Five weeks ago - repentance / confessing and being turned around
- Four weeks ago - providence vs. seeing life as good or bad luck
- Two weeks ago - worship gives us a structure for life and nurtures our relationship with God
- Last week - servanthood - eyes focused on our Master with attentive responsiveness vs. half hearted listening

Ellen Glasgow, in her autobiography, tells of her father who was a Presbyterian elder, he was serious about living his religion and carefully doing his duty. She described her dad, “he was entirely unselfish, and in his long life he never committed a pleasure.”

I suppose there is some truth to the idea that there are a few Christians who never seem to crack a smile and don't appreciate laughter and levity in church and in our life together. But for the most part, that stereotype is untrue, in my experience.

A story is told about Martin Luther and his close friend Philipp Melanchton, who was the author of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchton was a scholarly and a pious and a reserved kind of a guy, and Luther not so much in terms of being reserved and measured with his words. One day Luther lost patience and suggested “why don't you go out and sin a little? God deserves to have something to forgive you for!”

In today's sermon we would explore this simple truth that joy is characteristic of Christian pilgrimage. It is second in Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit of God. Eugene Peterson suggests that “joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It's not what we have to acquire in order to experience life in Christ, it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.”

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Today we would distinguish between worldly happiness and Christian joy. Worldly happiness is sought after through entertainment and eating and drinking and being merry. Christian joy comes to us as we receive the forgiveness of our sins and reassurance that God loves us and is with us and has a plan to work out everything in our lives for our good. Three truths we would offer today on this matter of joy that is rooted in the presence and the promises of Jesus Christ in our lives. Truth #1 has to do with the past, #2 with the present, and #3 with the future.

Truth #1 is that Christian joy is rooted in history.

In Psalm 126 v. 3, we have this statement of the exiles who were returning to their homeland, “**The Lord has done good things for us; we are glad.**” Now that’s a statement God’s people could say in every generation, right? The Lord has done good things for us; we are glad! Can I get a Lutheran amen to that?

In today’s OT lesson, the Jewish people are celebrating the dedication of the rebuilt temple of Jerusalem. Their celebration included the sacrifice of 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats. Their celebration of the Passover had followed no fewer than 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Their recent history had included one wave of returning exiles under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Their history had included another 50 years which included Queen Esther saving them from destruction by the amazing providence of God. Their recent history included the restoration of the temple with the help of a heathen king

Fast forward to the New Testament fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies, and we see that Christian joy is rooted in historical fact. It’s historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. Historical fact that he lived the perfect life we needed him to live, he suffered all that he was appointed to suffer, he died that one death that could give us life, he rose up in glorious fashion on the third day and he appeared in the flesh to groups large and small for 40 days. It’s historical fact upon which our faith and our hope and our peace and our joy are based. There is no virus and there is no mask mandate that can take away our faith and our hope and our peace and our joy. There is no amount of political unrest and bickering and partisanship that can take away all that we have received by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ alone, as recorded in Scripture alone. Can I get a Lutheran amen to that?

The kingdom of God is like a group of Packer fans who can tell you with deep and abiding satisfaction that their team has won 13 national championships, more than any other franchise. Some of them can rattle off the years - 1929, 1930, 1931, 1936, 1939, 1944, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1996, and 2010. Their worldly happiness, their bragging

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rights, their joy, if you will, is based in historical fact, and believe me, Vikings fans have two chances to diminish that joy, slim and none.

Truth #1 is that Christian joy is rooted in historical fact.

Truth #2 is that Christian joy is sustained here and now by the means of grace.

In today's Epistle Lesson, Paul is writing from his prison cell to a congregation of believers whom he loved, the Philippians. He was aware that their congregation was being torn apart by two prominent women who were disagreeing with each other. He pleaded with Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord. He encouraged the entire congregation to complete his joy by being of the same mind and having the same love and by being in full accord and of one mind. He directs them to the promises of God's Word as a way of sustaining that joy. The Lord was near to them in the Word and in the Sacraments, and therefore they had no good reason to be anxious about anything. The Lord was near to them in the forgiveness of sins and in the preaching of His Word and in the Sacrament of His Altar and in the waters of Baptism, and therefore they had every reason to be thinking about that which was true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent and worthy of praise.

The Lord was near to them in terms of coming back again soon to judge the living and the dead, and therefore they had good reason to believe that the peace of God would be like their guardian angel, it would be surpassing understanding and going beyond human circumstances and guarding their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The kingdom of God is like Christians in a northern province of China being told they will lose their welfare benefits unless they take down all crosses and replace any displays of Jesus with portraits of Chairman Mao and President Xi Jinping. And still they believe that Jesus is their Savior, they rejoice that their names are written in the book of life, their hearts are guarded by the peace that the world has no idea how to give, the peace of Jesus delivered to them in the teaching and in the remembering of the Word of God.

Truth #3 is that Christian joy is nurtured by anticipation of what is yet to come.

In Psalm 126 vs. 5,6, Peterson translates, "*And now, God, do it again - bring rains to our drought stricken lives. So those who planted their crops in despair will shout hurrahs at the harvest, So those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.*"

In the ancient times, the sowing of grain was often a difficult and treacherous process. The soil could be rocky, the thistles and thorns could be persistent, the drought could be

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destructive, and so the farmer would sow with tears in his eyes, hoping for a harvest that would be plentiful. One commentator described a scenario where the farmer's children were on the verge of starving to death and the grain supply was nearly empty, and the farmer would need to take the seeds that his wife needed to make bread, and he would sow into the ground, in anticipation of a harvest where they could be bringing in the sheaves with much laughter.

Fast forward to the 1930's when my father and grandfather and hundreds of thousands of other farmers planted their crops year after year, only to have failure after failure and many of them losing their farms and having to start over.

Fast forward to 2019, where I read a statistic that the cost of farmers planting corn these days had risen to \$586 per acre. To this day, we can imagine that farmers and their families are planting their crops with all kinds of anxiety, hoping for a harvest that will be cause for rejoicing.

Psalm 130 says it this way, For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt, it is to get rid of pain by eating or by drinking or by medication or by whatever numbs our nerves. We try to make life better staying busy or by mustering our own happiness in a thousand different ways, but Psalm 126 offers a different strategy.

Peterson writes, "Laughter is a result of living in the midst of God's great works. Enjoyment is not an escape from boredom but a plunge by faith into God's work. There is plenty of suffering on both sides, past and future. The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears.....Joy is what God gives, not what we work up. Laughter is the delight that things are working together for the good of those who love God....it is the joy of knowing that God's ways are dependable, his promises are sure."

The Bible says that it was for the joy that was set before him that Jesus endured the cross, He scorned its shame, He was crucified until He was dead and buried - all so that our sins could be forgiven and so that believing and baptized Christians could live face to face with him in eternity.

James writes that we should count it pure joy when we meet trials of various kinds, for we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. Jesus said it this way, that He came that we might have life and that we might have it not just a little bit some of the time,

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but that we would have life abundant, that we would have a fullness of joy, a joy that the world will never be able to understand, much less enjoy.

The kingdom of God is like a group of youth and adults going on a mission trip. They have a great time touring some interesting sights, they enjoy the scenery of the mountains, they have a happiness that comes with rafting down the river or listening to Mark Pehrson and Nate Ross stories, they get all kinds of satisfaction in working hard and painting buildings and serving people who may or may not send them a thank you note. Their real joy isn't what they sort of muster up on their own. Their joy is rooted in their faith, faith that is centered in the historical facts of Jesus dying and rising again on their behalf. Their joy is sustained by the Word of God along their way. Their joy is nurtured by an anticipation of Jesus saying to them on the last day....well done, good and faithful servants. When I was hungry, you gave me a cheeseburger and fries. When I was thirsty, you gave me a case of water. When my building needed to be painted, you painted it. When I needed you to listen to me and be interested in my hurting heart, you listened to me and you were interested. And so it happens that the Holy Spirit fills them with joy as they practice a long obedience in the same direction. Amen.