

May 9, 2021

John 15: 9-17

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“In You and In Me”

The gospel is a witness revealing who Jesus is. As we go deeper, we discover the impact Christ makes on us and this points to somethings else the gospel reveals. It shows us the truth about ourselves. Sometimes it's good to just state the obvious, so we can be clear about what all of this means for our lives. What is obvious? It is this: when we learn something about Jesus we learn what God is doing in our lives because of him. An example of this multi-layered discovery of who Jesus is and who we are is found in the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, our reading for today. We've jumped into the middle of chapter 15, so we didn't hear the opening words from verse one but we should, because they set the context for today's message. The chapter begins with Jesus revealing this about himself, he says, “I am the true vine...” (John 15:1) And then, a breath or two later he says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15:5) There it is. When we learn something about Jesus we learn something about ourselves. Vine and branches. We don't have to be a knowledgeable gardener to catch the meaning. There is an intricate, seamless connection between Jesus and us. This connection carries the flow of life. Even further, the life force that flows from Jesus into us produces a result, which in the metaphor of vine and branches is identified as fruit. Did we know we are fruit bearers? Let that sink in. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, and this means something comes into being because of our connection to him. Think about it. The fruit that grows from a branch isn't for the branch, it is offered to the world. Fruit is good and nourishing and lovely in order to be given and shared. Our image on the screen today shows a beautifully ripened bunch of grapes. If you don't like grapes the picture may not do it for you but for those of us who do, our mouths start watering just looking at this fruit. Again, we get the meaning. The vine and branches bring the grapes into being and now they are ready to be shared with a hungry and thirsty world. This is what Jesus makes possible through us. And, what, exactly, is the fruit produced because of our faith? Again, Jesus is clear. The fruit is love. This is a love that flows from God through Christ through us and into the world, a love that isn't meant to be held or hoarded but a love that must be offered to others. We are love producers. I like that as a description of the church. We produce love. This is so lifegiving, but there is even more good news. Those who produce love experience joy. There's an old song, and I'm dating myself by even recalling it, which sings, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's much too little of.” Well, with all we've been through and are still going through in our world, I think the world can use some joy, too. Maybe that's what there's too little of. As I say, this is extra good news and don't just take it from me. Listen to the words of Jesus we've read today, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11) The fruit is love and when we produce it and offer it, and taste it, and share it, it's all joy.

Through the years, I've appreciated sharing a story or two about my mom on Mother's Day. I'm certain I've told this story before but it stays with me. When I was first entering ministry, I was preparing for what is called “the interview” with the Board of Ordained Ministry. This involves ministerial candidates going before a team of clergy and lay persons who examine the candidate to determine the authenticity of his/her call. It's nerve wracking because there is a lot on the line and some of you may have experienced similar times in your life when you want to be at your best so the outcome is what you want it to be. I remember talking with my folks as I was heading into the interview and my mom said something that has stayed with me. She knew my theological training and ministry experience had prepared me well but she told me not to lose sight of the most important thing. She said, “Larry, just be yourself.” Her advice wasn't complicated but it was just what I needed to hear. “Be yourself.” In other words, my mother wanted me to stay in touch with who God had created me to be and to trust that, and to let that come through.

It so happens that the words we've heard from Jesus are among the last words of Jesus before he is arrested and ultimately crucified. What are his final words to his beloved friends? Well, they are not a warning to shape up or else. He doesn't say that when he is gone they must develop a system of religious rules that are heavy and guilt-producing. Jesus' final teaching doesn't instruct them to do everything they can to protect themselves by only staying within their group and with those who look and think exactly as they do. No, what Jesus says is that they are to be themselves. My mom had it right. Jesus reminded his followers who God had created them to be and whatever they faced they should remember that. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” said Jesus. Those who follow him are created to produce love, to stay solidly in the flow of God's love, and to experience the fullness of joy that comes from a life connected to Christ.

In our congregation, we often share in the blessing of baptism in the lives of young families and their children. When I think of joy in the Christian life, celebrating the sacrament of baptism is that kind of experience. Small children are always unpredictable in these moments. They are usually wide-eyed and sometimes anxious, but when we affirm God's love for them we affirm God's love for us, too. There are many baptism moments that stand out for me but I'm thinking of one in particular. The child was young but of the age that he was a bit too big for me

to hold. I knelt down to his level and touched his head with the water three times saying the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The little boy's response was one of the best faith affirmations I've ever heard. As the water touched his head and dripped a little on his nose, he exclaimed, "Yea!" Oh, to experience that kind of joy when we realize God's love is flowing for us and through us and into the world. Baptism is the affirmation of God's love for all of us. This is the joy that is in Christ and Jesus wants our joy to be complete.

Today, may our joy increase. It's often the small things that can make the difference, like a drop of water on your nose. Did someone greet you warmly today or did you reach out to someone else? Joy! Are you planning on eating food that is your favorite? Joy! Are you thinking about the memory of a mother or grandmother today, or connecting with mom, or celebrating other women in your life who have been like a mother to you? Joy! Are you able to acknowledge the miracle that you awakened today, are breathing in air, and are moving and living another day? Joy! Do you have a way of sharing love and receiving love today? This is because Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Joy!

I know it's not always easy. Life and the world have their challenges, to be sure. But, there is love in and through it all. Jesus wants us to have no doubt. Jesus wants to be filled with joy. Amen.