

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty
Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine
May 6, 2018—Sixth Sunday of Easter
Text: Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

Love for the Sake of Joy

Not long ago I was talking with a friend who had gone back to work recently after having a second child. It was a different job than she had had before; when she had returned to that job after her maternity leave, it became clear that it wasn't going to work anymore for her family of now four. So she quit, and with her husband asked some tough questions about what they wanted and what they could manage for their family. "What are we really doing here? What are we all about?" Those questions led her to a new job now that works much better for her family.

One of the best things about times of change is the way they invite us to ask those big questions. What are we really doing here? What are we all about? They're good questions for Redeemer in this time of change. What are we really doing here when we "do church"? What are we all about as followers of Jesus?

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our denomination has given us a big hint about that. Our motto is "God's work, our hands." Which is a pretty good description of what we're all about. We are all about doing God's work of love in the world.

I'm not sure when that motto came into being, but whenever the ELCA adopted it, the concept had been around a long time before that. I absorbed it well from my Lutheran parents and Lutheran church and the so-called Protestant work ethic. When I was a teenager, if you asked me what God wanted from me, I would have said God wanted me "to be useful." To use my hands for God's work, in other words.

God's most important work is unfolding here in the 15th chapter of John, where Jesus is speaking to his disciples, his dear friends and followers. Today's gospel picks up where last week's left off. It is the night of his last supper with the disciples, and he is about to be arrested and put on trial and crucified. His words are, as one commentator put it, "urgent pastoral care" toward disciples who are about to experience something really, really hard and confusing and terrifying and ultimately wonderful.

We heard Jesus talk about abiding last week, and he's still talking about that this week: about staying connected with God and Jesus and one another, and following the commandment he gave them when he washed their feet, to love one another as he had loved them. Now we get to the point of his words to them. What is all this really about? "I have said these things to you *so that...*"

And here I imagine a pause. Why have you said all these things to us, Jesus? So that we can be useful and do your work with our hands? So that the hungry can be fed, the sick healed, the lonely embraced, the grieving comforted, and the captives set free? So that suffering may be ended and evil may be vanquished and all may live in harmony and *shalom*? Is that why you have said these things to us about abiding in you and bearing fruit and loving one another, Jesus?

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Joy is what we are really about! Which is...maybe not what we were expecting. One commentator puts it like this:

For some Christians today, faith is the most important dimension of a disciple’s life. For others, love is the ultimate goal toward which any truly living faith will lead. But for John, there is yet another, even higher aim, for the sake of which faith and love abide. Jesus calls it “complete joy.” This is the “for what” of God’s love and deliverance, the “for what” of salvation, the “for what” of Jesus’ ministry and therefore the ministry of the church. For joy! Faith, yes—but faith for the sake of joy. Love, yes—but love for the sake of joy.*

I first tried to get my head around this idea of joy when I was working at a Jesuit Catholic university. As a still-new pastor, I had been hired on a project designed to encourage discussion of vocation on campus—to help students, staff, and faculty reflect on what God was calling them to be and do. Depending on their background, not everyone used God-language. But everyone was engaged in the work of discernment, making decisions according to what mattered most to them. One of the discernment tools we used with students had been adopted from another Jesuit school. It was known as the Three Key Questions. The first one blew me away when I started working there. It was, “What gives me joy?”

I don’t know if they started with joy because of John’s gospel, but they could have. We start here: What God wants for us is joy. Joy that is complete, a word in Greek that also means “full.” God wants not just a little joy for us, just enough to get through the day, but *full joy, overflowing joy*. So when we are considering decisions about our work and family and life, we ask, “What gives me joy?” and joy points us in the direction of God.

The hardest part about this, we found, is that it’s easy to get confused about joy. We spent a LOT of time talking with students about how to tell the difference between joy and other things, like fun, and happiness, and cheerfulness, and having a good time. Joy isn’t the same as any of those. You can be joyful when you are NOT having a

* <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/5/1/love-for-the-sake-of-joy-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>

fun time, and when you are NOT exactly happy or cheerful. Fun and happiness and a good time depend on what is happening to you in the moment. Joy is a deeper experience, a sense of being in the right place and belonging and being at peace in a way that makes you want to rejoice and praise God. (As the psalmist says: To “sing a new song to the Lord”!) This is much closer to what the word means in Greek, as Jesus uses the word in John’s gospel.

In that way, joy can coexist with pain. Here is Jesus on the night of his arrest, talking about joy. Soon to be betrayed and abandoned by his best friends, he is still talking about joy. Anticipating an excruciating death—somehow, it’s all about joy, because *this* is what he came for, *this* is how he loves the world. He puts the pain and joy in context a little later in John 16:

²⁰Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²²So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

A few verses later he says, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” This word comes up again in our reading from 1st John: “the victory that *conquers* the world, our faith.” Because if you manage to do what Jesus did—hold onto joy without denying great pain—you can’t be overcome by anything the world can dish out. Not even death.

So, what gives you that kind of joy? If that’s what Jesus is about, then that’s what we are about as his followers and his church: love for the sake of joy. “What gives you joy?” is a good question for transition, in this season of graduations and new beginnings. Joy points us in God’s direction, because what God wants for us is to be a part of divine joy in the world.

“What gives us joy?” is a slightly different question than, “What work does God want us to do?” Joy gives us a different image of God, one who is less taskmaster and more the one who delights in creation. (I read an article in the Lutheran magazine once about how maybe our ELCA motto should talk about God’s play as much as God’s work.) But they are both about loving one another. We love one another because it leads to joy, even when it is not necessarily fun.

Here’s one example: A few weeks ago the greater Bangor community came together for a healing service responding to the opiate crisis. Law enforcement, medical providers, the recovery community, grieving families, and many faith communities were all represented among the 500 or so people there. There were heart-wrenching testimonies, beautiful music, and prayers for God to lead us, to show us how to love another in this crisis. It was not “fun.” No one was “happy” to be there.

We were not “having a good time.” But There. Was. Joy. Joy in the midst of pain. Joy in the hope against hope that what Jesus said is true, that he has overcome all suffering and death and anything the world can dish out. Joy especially in coming together in love.

As you discern God’s future for this congregation, I hope you will talk about joy, and not only about work. When you ask what kind of love God is calling you to have and do together, I hope you ask what kind of love will bring you the fullness of joy that God wants for you. I hope you will keep asking how you can point others to that joy, even as you do God’s work with your hands together.

I think these are simply different words for something you already know how to do. Over these years I have heard you communicate your joy in all sorts of ways. It has been a great privilege to share that joy with you, and also to welcome a number of people into it through baptism and affirmation of baptism, just as we did a few weeks ago.

There is one more new member who was out of town for that day, who will affirm her baptism after the sermon hymn today. Amy E’s story with Redeemer is a wonderful story of the joy that comes from loving one another, so I asked her if I could share it with you. She first became acquainted with the Redeemer community through the K family. She received a prayer shawl a while back when she was in the hospital, and after that she asked, Can I make one of those to give back? Mary put her in touch with Nancy S, who said, Sure! In fact, why don’t you come and knit with us in the Fiber Arts group? Joining the Fiber Arts group on Tuesdays—plenty of joy to go around there!—turned into joining the Bible study group on Wednesdays too, and as they say, the rest is history.

We say to Amy the same thing we might say to *all* members and friends of the community, old and new: We are delighted to join with you in the Body of Christ, not only for the work of love we can do together, but also for the joy we can experience together.

We celebrate that joy in many ways, especially in the joyful feast we share in communion. With his own body and blood, Christ gathers us into God’s joy, that our joy may be complete.

Hymn of the Day: ELW 532, Gather Us In