

### **“The Church is a Joyful People”**

John 17:13

Sunday April 15, 2018

Dr Clay Smith

As I mentioned last week, we have begun a series called “The Church Is...” flowing from Jesus’s prayer in John 17. This was the prayer he prayed with and for his disciples as he was proceeding to the Garden of Gethsemane, on his road to anguish, the cross, and ultimately victory in the resurrection and triumph over evil.

What you may not know is that I plan my sermons about 6 months out. Topics, texts, even main ideas. There have been occasions where I’ve changed something in a series because of an event or something. It is rare for me. And yet, in God’s providence, more than 6 months ago, the Lord knew that on today, April 15, 2018, the people of God called Central Church needed to hear about joy. In the difficulty, suffering and distress of the now two-week old news of abuse, in our pain, the Lord knew we needed to contemplate joy. I don’t know about you, but I personally find that amazing, the Lord’s tenderness and kindness to us.

Joy. When we gather together as the people of God as we spoke last Sunday and we worship, the purpose is not to make us all happy, clappy chipper folks. Something far deeper is going on here. Even as Jesus prayed this, remember, he was marching to his death and separation from his heavenly Father. He was going to a place where he would sweat blood there was so much stress. His followers were about to head into a tail spin, and it is in that moment he prays that the Church is a People of Joy.

**John 17:13** But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

What really is joy, after all? Sometimes we confuse it with happiness or pleasure, simply good feelings that make us feel warm and fuzzy. There is some overlap between joy and happiness. But it seems the way the Bible talks about joy is a bit different from that.

Joy is really not something that is circumstantial, like when something good happens and we feel happy about it, and when something bad happens we lose it. That’s something else altogether. Not Joy when we have health, or when we have ease, wealth and comfort. Joy when everybody thinks super highly of us...well, that is easy, is it not. Why would that sort of I-feel-good when-everything-is-going-well be a testimony of an immovable, all-powerful, giving life to the dead kind of God? What attraction would anyone feel to something they can already have in their happy circumstances? Instead, what we have in Jesus, and what he prays for us is that in this broken world, filled with pain and struggle, in our sorrow and among our tears, there is STILL an irrepressible Joy because the Jesus who sits on the throne of all the earth knows my name and loves me.

Joy or the lack thereof is quite often tied to what we set our hearts on, that which we live for. When we set our hearts on success, or live for it, then we become discontent, even hopeless. When we set our hearts on circumstance management, making everything turn out just fine, when we live for handling the problem, then we feel hopeless and joyless when we come to the end of our strengths and abilities. If we set our hearts on something hoping it gives some sort of joy, that thing will torture us. Why? Because things, people—even trusted leaders—in this world disappoint, betray us, hurt and harm like we all experienced recently. Neither ultimately does work give joy, for what do we do when it is lost, or when we fail?

Sophia Loren has been quoted by many as having commented a while ago, “My life is what I always dreamed of. I’ve made films. I’m married to Carlo. I’ve born his children. There’s only one thing I lack. In the very center of my life, I find there a void that is almost impossible to describe.” It is possible to have it all, and feel incredibly empty. Joy does NOT come from circumstances in this life.

We might wonder whether the world does not need to see our mission as a people who are happy so that they might be drawn to Christ? Is that not important? Well, sure it is important. But my suggestion is that our testimony is not that we are happy all the time. Because to be happy all the time would bear false witness to the brokenness and pain and abuse

and injustice in this world that Jesus died and rose to heal! What the world needs is to experience us as a people of joy, a deep and abiding joy, a joy that can't be repressed that is NOT connected to our circumstances

Where then? Jesus prayed we as the Church be a people of joy. So where might we come to it?

1. **We have a joy that does not rely on circumstances because Jesus holds fast to us, and to our future.**

1 Peter 1:3-6

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials

What we hang onto in this life, the things we discussed a moment ago as that which we may lean upon to provide a sense of joy are perishable, defiled and fading. That's why we feel empty. But what Jesus offers to his people is an inheritance, an eternally secure blessing of being his child, his adopted child, that will never spoil or wear out, never cease to dazzle us (imperishable), one that can never be touched by evil or abuse or pain or sorrow (undefiled), and will never, ever go away or be snatched from us (unfading).

But here is the part where real joy comes from, a deeper satisfaction with God than circumstance could ever bring. He works both ends against the middle. **Joy is living with confidence that these things are true.** Look closely at vs 4-5, **this inheritance is being kept in heaven for you.** God is the one who secures this blessing and gift. Your eternal future is personally secured by God. It can never be taken away. Further, v. 5 **for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith.** Do you see that? God is not only keeping your inheritance for you, but he is also keeping, guarding you to be sure you have the inheritance!

Jesus is holding on to your blessing so that you may rejoice in knowing you will have his kindness and blessing, eternal salvation through the bloody cross and empty tomb. He holds fast to your inheritance of life. But he is ALSO holding on to YOU that you will experience it!

That is where joy can come from friends. No matter what happens in your life. Kids, no matter who might betray you or fail you. Adults, no matter how you fail to achieve all you want to achieve. Your life has an eternal meaning because Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to give you the inheritance of being his brothers and sisters, receiving from the very hand of God the Father the blessings of Jesus the Son himself. NO circumstances can take that away.

And if that secure blessing is not enough, maybe you and I wonder whether we can make it! We are too tired, too broken, too exhausted, too ashamed, too beaten down by this unjust world. When we feel too beaten down, Jesus reminds us that we can make it because he himself guards us to bring us home safely! We can't lose! That's where joy comes from. Neither evil nor circumstances can ever pry our certain eternal inheritance from our hands, because Jesus himself holds fast to it AND to us. And both are sealed by his blood. THAT gives joy, friends. In the tears, this gives us joy. Hang on to that.

2. **Joy comes from seeing this same Jesus at work among his precious people now, in unity as a body.**

Joy is not simply about me, but there is a we component to joy. How?

Phil 2:1-5

So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

What Paul has his heart set on, and that which produces joy within him is the conviction that Jesus is alive and at work among the church. If he is alive and at work, if his promise that hell's gates cannot stop the growth of his people and kingdom, then we have something for which to be joyful in difficult circumstances, and even in suffering.

You may know that Paul wrote Philippians from prison, most likely from Rome. He had been ill, his companions had been ill near to death, he struggled with anxiety, and faced a potential death sentence. He was most likely chained to a jailer all the time. This we would expect is NOT the environment of writing effusively on joy. Yet, that is what he does. It was not the external circumstances that either produced OR withheld joy in his life. Rather, it was having glimpses of Jesus alive now in his people that gave joy.

In 2:1, Paul wrote, "If, or perhaps better, since you have these things," the hope of the Gospel, then in v. 2, he says, *complete my joy, bring to fullness my joy, how? By being of the same mind.*

He's saying, if harmony reigns among you, then my joy will be complete. When your unity is not only standing against outside opposition, but ALSO is standing against internal strife and self-interest, THEN my joy will be overflowing, Paul says. When we face pain and suffering and DON'T turn on one another and attack one another, if produces Joy? Why? It shows Jesus at work among us.

In fact, unity is connected to joy all through this letter. Think if you were a part of this church in Philippi gathered to hear a letter to you from Paul, the church planter who was now in prison. You hear in chapter 4, Euodia and Syntyche, agree together. These two women who were fighting with one another, called out in a Biblical letter for all to hear. Joy, he says, you two fighting agree, then again he says rejoice just a verse later. Joy is connected to expressions of unity.

Why? Unity does not come naturally to us. We, by nature are selfish creatures. We pursue selfish interests; we grasp for self-advancement; we refuse humility, but rather trumpet our defenses; we in our flesh are independent. We use our positions to get, rather than as opportunities to give. But when we don't do that, when we lay aside self for the benefit of others it reveals Jesus at work! That's why Paul's joy is connected to unity: because we can't gin up unity ourselves. It is a fragile gift of God; it reveals the work of God. Unity provides us the clearest picture of Jesus alive and at work among us because His body is working together! Our unity reveals Jesus alive and at work to the world.

Let me turn that around and look at it the from the other end. One theologian said, "Divisions in the church breed atheism in the world." Yet, Jesus's desires for us are better things, joy in the face of unity.

That unity and joy is through being reminded of what we have in the good news of the gospel. Our ability to serve one another in joy is carried out day to day by believing our lives are hidden with Christ, tasting the experiential reality of his love, and seeking the daily partnership if the Spirit of God at work in our hearts.

What happens in you when you see someone battling challenging circumstances, and yet they radiate the love of Christ? Does it not affect your heart, too? I've sat with many of you in your living rooms, hospital rooms, in my study, as you've poured out hearts broken. This has been pretty frequent that past two weeks as I think we have wept more as a congregation than in a long time. And time after time, you pour out your pain, and even STILL lay hold of the love of Christ, the reality of his Spirit in you, the comfort you have of knowing his love for you despite the hard circumstances. And whenever I have the privilege of hearing that, my heart leaps with you! Why? My joy is filled up when I experience Jesus alive in you! Joy is not rooted in circumstances but in experiencing Jesus alive among us!

We all have seen the Union Jack, the flag of the United Kingdom. It flies over official buildings just like our US flag does. But did you know there is another flag, called the Royal Standard? It is just for the Queen and flies wherever the Queen is present. If she is in residence at Buckingham Palace or Windsor, or even when she visits Parliament, the Royal Standard is what flies. It lets everyone know the queen is present.

Joy is like that for the people of God. When we fly the flag of Joy it alerts the world, and it even alerts us that the King is here, King Jesus is in residence. His presence gives new hope. He has laid hold of sinners, changed our hearts and freed us to love on another as we've been loved. Who wants to demonstrate joy to the world with me?