

## The Good Ole Today's John 15:9-17

When I was younger, I became impatient with older friends and family members who talked with great fondness about “the good ole days.” Once I said to my father, “Why do you keep talking about the past? Why don’t you concentrate on the present?” I knew that my parents had grown up during the Great Depression and that they had married at the outbreak of World War II. From my perspective their “ole days” were certainly not “good.” I didn’t change anyone; the generation prior to mine persisted in describing the first half of the twentieth century as some kind of golden era.

However, I did make a personal vow not to fall into that pattern. My children probably think I break that vow every day, and perhaps I do. But one of my most cherished goals for life is to focus on the present. I am deeply grateful for my past—for all of it, the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, and the achievements and failures. But everyone must live in the present. We must occupy the moment. So, if you hear me rhapsodizing about the past, please stop me. I’ll be thankful.

It’s healthy for us to be able to see past times as “good ole days.” It’s extremely important that we see the present as “the good ole today’s.” Jesus intended that. Jesus described the way to life as awareness, understanding, love, peace, hope, and, yes, joy. Hear a line from today’s text: “I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.” This statement, when Jesus gave it, applied to his present. It applies to our present.

You know the situation. Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples. Within hours he would be arrested and in less than a day he would be crucified. And he spoke of complete joy! He did not look back on those days when the crowds thronged around him and people sang his praises. He did not look ahead

to some possible reward for his sacrifice. He talked of joy in the present moment.

That ought to get our attention. A lot of people today might feel a little foolish talking about joy. These are difficult times. We are experiencing a radical change in the way we live. Today we are thinking about needs, not wants. Many persons are deeply concerned about keeping their jobs and their homes. The church and other service and ministry organizations are seeing greater social needs and fewer resources. Why are we talking today about joy and why emphasize that joy is vital for the present?

My response is simple. Our lives, our ministry, our relationships, and our experiences are profoundly enhanced if we can say that these, too, are “the days that the Lord hath made, and we will rejoice and be glad in them.”

Lest you think me too much a ministerial Pollyanna, I need to make two comments about joy and hard times. These are not qualifications; they are necessary explanations. One is my definition of joy. The dictionary says that joy is “a glad or happy feeling.” A book of synonyms lists these words for joy: happiness, gladness, delight, gaiety, bliss, and glee. We tend to think of joy as happiness. Happiness for me is a surface emotion. Joy is much deeper and more pervasive. Joy is an unshakable sense of well-being; it is the conviction that life at bottom is good and worthwhile, as God pronounced it to be in the story of the creation; and it is the assurance that the outcome of life is secure and that ultimately we are victors over all things. Joy can be a reality whether one is happy or sad, celebrating or mourning.

My other comment is that I do recognize that life is filled with hardship. I often quote a line that hit me many years ago. I picked up Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled*. It was already immensely popular. The first sentence (actually, the first paragraph) is this: “Life is difficult.” I couldn’t put the book

down. Later, Peck did a book called *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*. The first sentence in the second book is: "Life is complex." Difficult and complex! Yes, those are words that come to mind immediately when I think of life in the modern world.

Does that mean that joy has no place? Does it mean that finding joy is a secret process that only a few persons can follow? Well, consider first the example of Jesus before we look at his words. When I read the gospels, I sometimes ask what attracted people to Jesus. Why did children feel comfortable in his presence? Why did women risk ridicule to look him in the eye and converse with him? Why did fishermen and artisans leave their trades and follow him? Why did members of the ruling religious class such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea engage him in discussion?

Was it his teachings or his philosophy? Probably not. Jesus was not really an original thinker. Of the 111 verses that make up the Sermon on the Mount, only 18 do not appear in earlier works of the rabbinical schools. Was it the healings or the miracles? Probably not. Many of the Pharisees could exorcise demons and perform acts of healing. Was it his willingness to die? Not at that point. Martyrs were numerous. Political criminals were executed by the thousands in defense of Israel.

What I think made Jesus a magnetic personality was a relationship with God that radiated joy, peace, security, and exuberance with life. Religion for Jesus was not a burden but a joyous expression of oneness with God. Life was an adventure. My image of Jesus is that of a man fully alive.

Then, there is his message. He said that he came to bring "life in all its abundance," "to seek and to save those who had lost their way," "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He communicated the forgiveness and acceptance of God. Almost all Jesus said contains the element of joy. The statement on which

we meditate today gives a summary: “I have spoken thus to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.”

Several things in this passage point to the great possibilities for joy that Jesus brings. For one, we have the image of the vine. The meaning seems obvious. Jesus said that he is the vine and that we are the branches. We have the word picture of connection with him. But there’s much more. On a vine all the branches look pretty much alike. The leaves are all similar in color and shape. Could Jesus be saying that all persons are equally special in God’s sight? That’s not the standard of society where there are all kinds of differences that mark our lives. Also, we have the reminder that everyone in Christ draws nourishment from him. We die on our own.

What I read from this figure of speech is that all of us have the possibility for “abundant” living and that each of us can know the completeness of joy. We have a connection with Jesus and a connection with each other.

Furthermore, within this relationship there is no fear of being out of contact. The vine grows the branches. God has given this connection. He will not break it. Richard Foster, who has written extensively about spirituality and Christian discipline, said in one of his books that he went through a period of terrible guilt. He was not enjoying his relationship with God at all. He talked with a spiritual counselor about his problem. The friend suggested that he list all the sins and shortcomings that were causing him difficulty. For days Foster worked on his list. At the next session with his counselor he read his list, then started to fold it to return it to his pocket. The counselor asked to see the list. He tore it into small pieces and dropped them into the wastebasket. “If you have confessed your sins,” he said, “God has already forgotten them. Why don’t you?”

We can walk with God in perfect peace. The past is covered; it is good. In fact, the present and the future are covered. We know where life is headed. We know the outcome. And, just before the comment on joy, Jesus gave the reminder of the way his followers are supposed to live. "As the Father has loved me," he said, "so I have loved you. Now remain in my love."

Notice all the suggestions that arise from this simple image of the vine. We have a lasting connection with God and with each other; we have a limitless source of strength; and we have an ethic and mindset of love. In the light of all this Jesus was able to say, "I have spoke thus so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

So perhaps the message of joy is not irrelevant in our day. Perhaps we need to hear it. Faith is something to enjoy and to celebrate. During my years in seminary and graduate school I read many of the works of Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. He was known for his massive *Church Dogmatics* and his fierce, combative shorter works on Christian thought. Yet Barth experienced joy. He relished in the joy of faith, especially in the joy he found in music. He was particularly fond of Mozart. Late in his life Barth said in an article that appeared in a Zurich newspaper that he had listened to Mozart almost every morning of his adult life. He laughingly said, "If I ever get to heaven, I will first seek out Mozart and only then inquire after St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin."

The further I travel in my pilgrimage, the more I am convinced that God intends for us to be filled with joy.

J. William Harris  
17 May 2009