

The Sixth Sunday in Easter
May 17, 2009
Psalm 98:1-6; John 15:9-17
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One of our favorite songs in Sunday school is, “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.” Perhaps the main reason the children love singing this song is because they get to shout the response to the leader’s question. (Where? Down in my heart!! Where? Down in my heart!!) Nevertheless, it’s a delightful song that I remember singing as a child too, clapping and shouting as we sing about joy, the love of Jesus and the peace that passes understanding.

It’s a great song for Sunday school or Vacation Bible School—joyfully singing about having Jesus in my heart and everything is OK. It works well for 4-year-olds, but not as much for adults who have experienced the complexities of faith and life, who may not always feel joyful, and who wonder what it really means to have Jesus in your heart.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus speaks about joy to his friends: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love...I have said these things to you so that your joy may be complete.”

What does complete joy look like? When have you experienced joy? Some will answer this question, “When my child was born and I held her for the first time.” Or “When I was first falling in love with my soul mate.” Or “when I landed the perfect job and knew I was doing the work I was called to do” A vivid picture of pure joy for me was the first time we visited Millennium Park and watched as both children and adults joyfully splashed in the cool waters on a warm summer day. There was carefree abandon from the worries of the world, and people simply delighted in the presence of friend and stranger, playing together. I remember saying, “this is pure joy!”

Last Monday I experienced a different kind of joy as I watched a family who delighted in one another’s presence and the memories they’d shared. It’s not the type of scene one might usually use to describe complete joy. I stood on the porch of a hospice patient’s home, and as I knocked on the door I heard exuberant singing. The patient’s husband answered the door and welcomed me into the living room where the patient sat propped up by numerous pillows, surrounded by her 3 sons. One was sitting on the bed with a guitar in his lap, the other two were near her side holding her hand or caressing her back. When I asked what they were singing, they sheepishly told me, “Just some Beatles songs.” Then we all laughed.

I expected it might be some religious singing, prayers or chants, because she is a professional music leader in a religious community. But the most important act for them was to be singing, it didn’t matter what or how religious it was. What mattered most was that they were together at this time sharing music, memories and laughter, helping her to fully live while dying.

It’s the kind of picture perfect way we hope families will be as their beloved is reaching the final days of life. Each of the 3 boys was attentive to her, keeping her comfortable, helping her laugh, while being honest that there is much to be crying about. Even in the midst of suffering and sorrow there was complete joy in that home as they shared with each other lives lived in an

abiding love.

Jesus says to his friends who are gathered around him as he prepares for his own death, “This is my commandment, that you love one another. Abide in my love. I will abide in you, and you in me; and your joy will be complete.” Abide in love...

George Johnson helped me understand this word, *abide*, a bit better because its a word that I rarely use in my everyday speech. He says *abide* suggests a place to remain, a home base, a point of reference, a lasting source from which to draw energy, a center not to be abandoned.

With whom or what or what do you abide? From where do you draw your energy? What is your home base? Your source or center? These challenging questions were presented to us this week during the text study attended by Lakeview pastors. And the answers were intriguing. Of course, we admitted, we would like everyone to answer, “Jesus” or “Church” but we also recognize that the answers vary quite a bit.

One pastor told about the homeless youth with whom she works and that for some of them, the Night Ministry is their home base, because of the relationships of trust and safety they’ve built there. The Night Ministry re-energizes them for the day ahead. Another person said her abiding place is actually a person; her best friend with whom she can share everything, ups and downs, accomplishments and vulnerabilities. In this relationship of trust, this woman knows her best friend will never abandon her and that she’ll be a lasting point of reference when life gets stormy. Neither of these relationships is perfect. There are disagreements and misunderstandings, but abiding love persists and through that love, joy emerges.

It’s not exactly a deathbed, but the conversation Jesus has with his friends *is* the night before his death. They’re not sitting around singing Beatles songs, but they are gathered together, abiding with one another, sharing life, hearing stories, listening intently as Jesus tells them what is most important: to abide in his love, and share that love with others. It’s not a command as much as it is an invitation into an abiding presence, a point of reference, a lasting source from which to draw energy.

If hospice patients choose to do so, they, too, can share wisdom and insight with family in their dying days. As their hospice chaplain I’ll record their answers and make video or audio recording, or help them to write an ethical will, and in it we ask them how they’d finish these sentences:

I think it is important to...
I wish someone had told me...
I would never have made it without...
I probably should have told you...
I believe that...

Without a video camera, a digital recorder or even a pen and paper Jesus’ friends are gathered for what will be his final words, commonly called his farewell discourse, and he tells them what is most important to him: abiding in love and joy.

What could be more simple, and yet more profound? We experience love and joy in places, work

and people with whom we have an abiding relationship. And it is my hope and hunch that you experience the abiding presence and love of Jesus here in this community, through water and word, in bread and wine, in a community of believers with whom you utter your most urgent prayers and raise your voice in exuberant singing.

In fact, our song just might be “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart....” Where? “Down in my heart.” Where? “Down in my heart to stay.”