



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

May 6, 2018

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-2, 8-17; Acts 8:26-40

*Life on the Vine: Sharing the Fruit of Joy*

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

A few weeks ago our staff cracked up. We start weekly meetings sharing personal news, connecting together. I asked Chrissy why we laughed so hard—a “had to be there” moment. Except we were and have no clue! After twenty minutes of hilarity, I recall Chrissy said: “I’m glad to be in a place where we laugh. Studies show it’s a healthy work environment.” I shared plans to talk about joy in this sermon. Last week: we abided on the vine on God’s love. This week: we bear fruit of joy when God’s love flows through us and we share it with others. So, at 9:24 last night, she texted me an article about research on laughter. How it fosters creativity and productivity. How humor triggers are really moments of connection. Laughter is human relationship. At best, I might add when arising from a deeper sense of joy.

The apostles must have had good humor! Acts recounts how the Holy Spirit empowered connections, relationships, church expansion. The vine entwines with ever more people, especially outsiders to God’s covenant of life and faith. Samaritans. A Roman Centurion soldier. Even with Saul, one who aggressively epitomizes that exclusion and persecution. It’s just before he becomes St. Paul through conversion on the road to Damascus. Now Luke tells us how God entwines lives of Philip and a eunuch going the opposite direction. The eunuch seems religiously devout. Yet his physical condition, by law, means he’s not good or perfect enough to participate fully in faith. Hear what the Spirit may say.

{read Acts 8:26-40}

It was not an easy time of humorous bliss. Jesus followers have been bullied, beleaguered, killed. In Jerusalem, Saul assaulted the church—house invasions, imprisonment—so the apostles scatter. Philip heads to Samaria and enjoys success evangelizing the least to the greatest in society. It goes so well, Peter and John come to help. Then an angel of God whisks Philip away from this bustling city center with so much potential to a deserted, wilderness road. How could he possibly expect to connect with anyone and accomplish anything good there?

The Eunuch seems a bit of a sad enigma. Eunuchs' sexual organs got cut off to serve as a slave in the queen's household. You see, friends, we didn't invent licentious things we hear in news of our day. Writing to the Galatians, Paul warns about behaviors like covetous lust, jealousy, enmity, drunken carousing, spilling into anger, strife, quarrels. It's not hard to imagine Shakespearean / Game of Thrones possibilities. I suppose powerful men thought: control the "bad," eliminate temptation—for their wives as much as the boys or young men nameless to them. Barely beyond puberty they're taken, they're trafficked, exploited for life. The man Philip meets is a commodity of society. His life is not valued for who God created him to be, rather for how he's used by the rich and powerful; defined by abuse he endures.

It's sad. People get commodified in our society, too. People like the eunuch still being trafficked. And every one of us when our value gets defined for better or worse by bank accounts or investments, or by accomplishments achieved and accolades received. Assessed by how we contribute to a business bottom line, to quantified educational standards, to someone else's expectation or definition of what life should be. However much we get sucked in or try to resist, don't we know intuitively that a good, fruitful life is about something more?

The eunuch longs for a good life. That's why he's traveled all the way from sub-Saharan Africa to Jerusalem. Surely, that's what he hopes for when he gets back home. When Philip encounters him, the book of Isaiah lies open in his lap.

Like a sheep led to slaughter, a vulnerable lamb silenced by the one who's shorn him. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his experience of life taken away?

"About whom is the prophet speaking," he asks Philip, with deep, empathic understanding. For it sure seems like the prophet speaks of his experience.

Now truth is, life is not all misery for the Eunuch. He's reading—so he's received education. He's riding in a chariot—so he has access to wealth and privileged connections, as Secretary of the Treasury. He's made a journey to Jerusalem—so he's cultivated an earnest sense of faith, even granted this pilgrimage opportunity. So much goodness ... yet, ultimately unfulfilled. So well-connected, even important in a way, yet, not quite complete in relationship with God and others. The eunuch thinks: the passage from Isaiah—it's about me. Not all misery, still life seems a bit shorn of true gladness. Maybe more poignantly so precisely because he tastes, he glimpses what life could be before his hopes, dreams, desires slam again into a glass ceiling, into literal and figurative walls of faith, social prejudice, lingering abuse. "... for his life is taken away ..."

Philip tells him it's about Jesus; sharing good news about God's promise for life we know in him—for people like you and me. Jesus entwined God's vine with people who couldn't walk, couldn't see, couldn't get well and so got left behind. Jesus entwined God's vine with people who were starving for much more than bread and fish beside the sea, wine at a wedding, or a final Passover meal that night before he died when he urged them: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus and Easter comes again—any sadness turns to peace. Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus and they're entwined

together in baptism, he's grafted onto the Vine of Christ. Philip tells the eunuch about Jesus and the eunuch goes home rejoicing.

Here's the thing, friends. Philip doesn't change the physical condition of the eunuch. As much as we'd like to take away hurt and heal everyone we meet. As much as we might want to protect our children and give someone we love a perfect life (whatever that means). As much as we work for God's order of grace and peace to touch all people and transform creation. We know sometimes there are realities about what's happened to us beyond our control, about how experiences have shaped our behavior and who we've become, about choices we've made and consequences that have come. Realities, on the outside we might say, that we cannot change. The Eunuch is still a eunuch after God entwined his journey of life and faith for a moment with Philip.

And when the eunuch saw Philip no more, he went on his way rejoicing. Can we remember real joy? I don't mean a good joke, or personal pleasure satisfied, or a passing sense of bliss. Fun, laughter, simply being happy ... true joy that Jesus means can include these good gifts. And the kind of holy joy he wants us to share is a deeper condition and enduring orientation of the heart on the inside, often even despite all evidence and experience to the contrary on the outside.

Of course, we know the cross came next for Jesus after he urges his friends to abide in God's love and bear fruit like branches on the vine. Friends, we know our lives can seem to lack love. Hurtful jokes. Needs unsatisfied. Bad news far from fun, bliss, and happiness. Surely, suffering in our lives or others isn't hard to remember. I wonder if we're able to receive real joy precisely because we've known some kind of fear, sorrow, tragedy, struggle, loss. We savor the sweetness of Sacred Love even more, because we've tasted sour bitterness. And we long for another bite of that divine fruit.

Make my love and joy complete ... and then Jesus says there is no better way than to give our very life in sacrifice. That's not quite the measure of good life for humanity we often hear in society. Holy Joy arises in relationships of love, Jesus urges. In giving we receive. In serving more than ourselves, satisfaction far exceeds momentary pleasure. In sacrifice God raises us with Christ to new life in ways unimaginable, even impossible ... in joy that is completed with peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and all other fruits of God's Spirit that St. Paul lists in the very next paragraph of that letter to the Galatians, and that Pat is upstairs teaching our children with her ever-ready smiling presence.

Friends, as we taste these fruits fulfilled and hunger for this loving relationship even more, our simple and persistent longing for this life is part of holy joy itself. Even in dark and difficult times, we give thanks for love shared. We trust God's desire for us—God who made us good and promises to be present with us everywhere without exception. We open our hearts to hope, to live for that connection again—with God and others. We seek signs of resurrection even we're in a seemingly deserted place. I wonder what wilderness roads we've traveled and who we've encountered on the way.

Krista Tippett invites others to climb into her radio studio to share personal stories, understand life and good news of faith. Sister Simone Campbell rides in a chariot of her own—a tour bus, actually—with companion nuns traveling our country like apostles long ago. I'm not sure who got in with whom. In a chapter titled, "Love: a few things I've learned," Krista admires the positive way Sister Simone engages concerns in such a polarized society. Sister Simone spars with Paul Ryan, often on opposite sides of issues. Both know they're better for it, entwined with mutual love. Once a colleague representative attacked her at a hearing. And Ryan remained

entwined, defending her, as “... well within the teaching of the Church, though we may not agree on these things.”

Krista and Sister Simone discussed spiritual practices, stories about other vulnerable, hard-working people she met on the road, doing her part to pursue life for the 100 percent, seeking some way beyond entrenched fighting and resisting. “Now the other piece that I haven’t really talked about,” Sister Simone said, “is joy. I goof off a lot. Joy is at the heart of this journey. Too often, [we] are really grim ... ‘miserable’ ... The amazing wonder is that we get to live this life in relationship.” Amid our hugely complex, multi-cultural world, tremendous possibilities exist to find our niche of “life-giving, and enjoying the life that is given to [us] and to others in the process.”<sup>i</sup>

Friends, I know I can sometimes feel too grim. We know church life can be serious stuff, inasmuch as it’s the stuff of daily life. I know I need laughter. I appreciate jokes you send me, and a bit of fun. And as a daily discipline of prayer I long for that holy joy deep in the heart of this journey, this amazing wonder of life-giving possibility we get to share. I love serving with our other ministers, staff, Session as we laugh at ourselves and with others and even just goof off from time to time. Chrissy’s favorite character is blue-haired Joy from the movie *Inside-Out*. She agreed, yeah, the way she tries to deal with difficult subjects is to do with it with light-hearted fun ... like the Stewardship fiesta planned for today after worship.

I love being entwined with people like all of you. Like one who jumped in this great big chariot years ago. Responding to the blog post this week, she reflected on the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness she said can be fleeting, because it centers around “happenings,” while joy is something that lasts because it’s not dependent on events, present even during times of sadness. Anyone who has ever felt loss of a beloved person or pet experiences the sadness of the event, but also

feels joy in remembered love and companionship. I've been able to maintain a sense of joy when it feels like the world is off its axis because of the serenity and peace provided by our church. Some churches proclaim the end is nigh, and prepare for the destruction of this wicked world and all the wicked people in it. I'm grateful every day for another way to frame to world events.

I love being entwined with people like all of you. Like another one who jumped in this great big chariot years ago and sent me an email message over the weekend. His life hasn't always been easy. But I almost always see a hopeful and grateful smile as he lives love and keeps learning a few more things every day. He recommends a recent book about the early church (like Paul, Philip and friends). And he explains in his message that literalism and earlier strict paradigms of faith drove him away from the church for years. He came away from the book with a greater appreciation for the power of the early Christian message, and for our church which continues to provide realistic and supportive companionship for living faith.

In a few moments, more new members will jump in this chariot, and join us in living faith. Seeking sanctuary in the city, we abide together on the vine of love, trusting in the gracious mercy of God. On the surface it might seem we have everything going for us, or nothing at all. Beyond our scars and splendors on the outside, God touches what's on the inside. Joy comes when our lives entwine through worship, ministry, study, and service. Something like singing in a round. That's how we'll do this next song. "May the God of hope go with us every day, filling all our lives with love and joy and peace." Our joy will be complete when Elizabeth plays through the song once entirely. Then we'll sing it together once. Then Chrissy and Larry will lead everyone on the lectern side of the sanctuary continuing to sing in time with the organ. Cindy on piano and I will lead everyone on the pulpit side to come in from the beginning after they finish that first phrase "with love and joy and peace." The Bible urges us to make a joyful noise. So may it

be right now, dear friends, and as we go on our way rejoicing, sharing the fruit of life on the vine with others we meet in wonderful and more wilderness places.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Krista Tippett, talking with Sister Simone Campbell, in *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 125, 129-130.