

August 16, 2020
Rev. Kerry Smith

John 15:1-11 Stop Being Nice: Be Joyful
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 15:1-11 New Revised Standard Version

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Many years ago I was in college and my boyfriend had taken me to downtown San Antonio on a date. We were talking and I asked him what he wanted out of life. I thought that his answer would be something along the lines of money or a fancy car. Maybe a big house or to be able to go on lots of trips. Those were the correct answers, I thought. My boyfriend told me that he wanted to be happy. I thought it was a dumb answer at the time, but I kept thinking about his answer. We ended up getting married and I often look at my husband Lee and think about his answer when we were nineteen years old. What do you want out of life? To be happy.

We know that happiness is based on circumstances. A few weeks ago we took our eleven year old car to the beach in Florida and it broke down sixty miles from home in Canton. The high that we were all on faded quickly. We had just gotten dinner at the Whataburger drive-thru when the battery indicator light came on, we pulled into the parking lot and the AC stopped working, and the car died. Lee said that his appetite vanished with the stress of what do we do now. Happiness is based on circumstances, but joy is an assurance of God with us.

We are talking this month about going deeper. Last week we talked about moving beyond being nice and moving toward kindness. This week we talk about moving toward joy. Amanda Quicksall from our church has taught me a lot about joy this last few months. Amanda has shared her journey with breast cancer on Facebook. She has counted down the weeks of chemo, and she has shared the days when she was just done. It was those days when she was vulnerable and shared how down she was that this community of faith and her other friends rallied around her. Sending her encouragement and love. One day she was feeling sorry for herself and she climbed back into bed with her dog and received some dog therapy. She also shared when she was angry, angry that she had cancer and angry that she had so much treatment still ahead of her. Angry because of Covid19, angry that her family has to go through this. Amanda wrote these words on her Facebook page, “I know all the good things. Trust me. I am so blessed and I have been so positive through all of this. But today let me sit with my anger and sadness. It’s a normal reaction.” She said that she would return to her positive self but today she wanted to be angry. The next day she said that she woke up renewed. The sun was out and she felt great.

Joy has plenty of room for anger, loss, betrayal, heartache, depression, despair. Joy doesn’t mean that we repress, avoid or deny. Joy can wrap its hands around the full spectrum of human experience.¹ Since joy is an assurance that God is with us, joy endures.

God says a lot about joy in the Bible. In the Bible passage that we read, Jesus says that joy comes from abiding in Christ and being pruned. Jesus says that we are to live in him, to make

¹ Rob Bell says this here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA7LmEn3xyc&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>

our home in him just as Jesus makes his home in us. We are to join with Jesus. When we are teaching the Confirmation kids about the Methodist faith, we talk about the Methodist idea of Christian perfection. The first Methodist John Wesley didn't understand perfection like we do. He thought of it as maturity. To be made perfect is to achieve the goal of the Christian life, which is to grow in our faith and become fully developed disciples of Jesus Christ in our love for God and others. To think of people the way God thinks about them. To have the mind that was in Christ. We should look for every opportunity to do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can, as long as ever we can.

Imagine if you can daily make yourself at home in God's love. If you can center yourself in that love. Jesus says loving one another the way that he has loved us is the best way to love. How can you ground yourself in Christ? How can you tie yourself to the vine of God's love? Is it found in saying a daily mantra, "I am a child of God." I love taking hot showers. Every single time that I take a shower, I put my face in the water and remind myself of my baptism, of God's love for me.

How can you find joy in the routine, in the every day, in the course of life. You might have to lower the bar, but we are surrounded by goodness and we need to be able to access it and to enjoy it. I find joy in sitting outside and watching birds come to the bird feeder in our backyard. I find joy in reading a good book. I find joy in going on a bike ride. Where do you find joy? We are a culture that has more wealth, technology, luxury and options than any civilization in the history of humanity and yet more of us are stressed, depressed, worried, and anxious and unable to enjoy all of this abundance. How can we stop, breathe, and enjoy the abundant life that is all around us?

Joy doesn't come from avoiding the pain of life that will inevitably come our way. Joy comes when we fully embrace that we are here and then we are gone. We are here now so let's do everything we can to enjoy it and make it satisfying. For joy to explode within us, Jesus tells us we have to be connected to the vine of God. How can we connect to God and feel more joy? How can we tie into the source of joy in God? One of the ways that I feel joy is connecting to community. Tonight we are having a backpack and device blessing as our teachers and students go back to school. This school year, the unknown is raising my fear level quite high. There is so much uncertainty about this upcoming school year. At 6:30 tonight we will gather to pray together and to remind ourselves that we are never alone. Everyone is welcome tonight and we want to especially invite all teachers and students to come, to get a backpack tag or a sticker for your device, and to pray together. Of course, please wear your mask so we can be as safe as possible. We will have another blessing of the backpacks and devices the Sunday of Labor Day weekend right before Dallas ISD goes back to school.

Our Bible passage today reminds me life is about community, it is about relationships. The branches of a vine are woven together, it is hard to pick out one branch from another. All of the branches run together as they come out of the central vine. We are called to encircle one another as community and to remember that the fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on the relationship to the vine, nothing else. Thanks be to God, Amen.

² Rob Bell says this here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA7LmEn3xyc&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>

³ Rob Bell says this here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA7LmEn3xyc&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>