

Sermon: The Fruit of the Spirit
Text: John 15:9-17
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Context: WWPC
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*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.*

John 15:11

[The following is what is known as a “dialogical sermon.” It was preached jointly by my colleague and friend, the Rev. Scott Hardin-Neiri, and I, Steve Runholt. Scott is the Director of the Creation Care Alliance, a local faith-based environmental agency based here in WNC. Though we preached it several weeks after Earth Day, it does have a creation care theme. The bolded sections are Scott’s, unbolded are mine.]

“[Climate change], school shootings . . . poverty, discrimination, apathy, violence, ignorance . . . injustice. Some days it's just too much for my little heart.”

This list is a Facebook status update, posted by a preacher, no less.

We could add our own entries to that list, I’m sure: frustration, anxiety, distrust, anger, outrage.

I’m guessing these are but a few of the things those of us in this room have likely felt just in the last week.

All of which makes this passage we’ve just read all the more important -- or all the more difficult -- to believe.

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete,” Jesus tells us.

Joy? Really? In a world filled with the events we just named, and the feelings that go with them, it sometimes seems like joy is luxury, a feeling available only to the elite few who aren't paying attention to what's actually happening in the world around them.

Yet joy is, indeed, part of the gift our faith offers us, part of the promise we've inherited as followers of Jesus, part of God's intention for us. But it doesn't come automatically.

Joy is not like a direct deposit into our spiritual bank account, a feeling that just magically occurs without our having to do anything. Joy is part of a larger picture, a larger conversation, a larger process.

Last week we read the opening chapters of this verse, a brief passage in which Jesus likens himself to a vine, and then encourages his listeners to abide in the vine, so that they might bear much fruit.

Our text for today picks up where we left off -- where he left off --last week. Together, these passages comprise a brief outtake from one of the longest speeches Jesus makes in scripture. It's called the Farewell Discourse.

And as I said last week, when you read this discourse as a whole, it feels like the kind of speech a parent might make on the day they drop their first child off at college.

Now remember, sweetie, wash colors on warm, and whites on hot and don't wash them together. I know you're going to party. You're now a college student after all. Mind you, I never did but times have changed. I know you're going to party some. So just don't ever accept a beverage from any boy you don't know.

For that matter, it's may be best if you don't accept any beverages from anyone ever. Ideally it would be best not to even go to parties. Now that I think about it, maybe you should just get back in the car and come home with me right now and we'll try this again next year.

You get started down that road and it takes a full thirty minutes to tell your kid everything you want to make sure she remembers before you take your leave and she finds herself facing life for the very first time without you there to back her up.

This particular passage is a little bit like that. It's crammed with a wide assortment of exhortations and instructions.

There are references to love and joy, to abiding and doing, to bearing fruit and obeying commandments, to being a servant and being a friend.

In the end, it reads like a big ol' helping of galosh, all the things mixed together in a pungent stew.

But here is one clear take away: Jesus seems to be firmly of the view that the practice and presence of love are essential to the presence and experience of joy.

For the first ten verses of this chapter Jesus focus mainly on exhorting his followers to abide in him, to dwell in God's love. Then he abruptly appears to sum up the reason he is encouraging them to do this:

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

And then right away he returns to his overarching topic of love, and how it's the centerpiece of his whole project.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Joy is sandwiched between multiple layers of love, like the coconut frosting in a German chocolate cake. You can't have one without the other--indeed, it's that combination of chocolate cake and coconut frosting that makes it, uniquely, a German chocolate cake.

Or maybe it's more like the relationship between body and spirit: they are intricately interwoven and mutually necessary. Without love there is no joy, just like without body, there is no spirit.

Either way, having established this vital relationship between love and joy, Jesus then expands the range of those who are included in his circle of love. He calls his followers not servants but friends.

What if we followed his example? What if we extended our own circle, our own understanding, of love just a bit?

What if we thought of earth itself, not just as the place where we live, but as a kind of friend, not just as the planet where we live, but as a kind of living being to be loved.

What might that do to our joy?

One person who might have answered that question was Wangari Maathi. Perhaps you know that name. In 2004 Ms. Maathai became the first African woman, the first Kenyan woman to be specific, and the first environmentalist, to win the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Before her death in 2011, Wangari Maathi seemed to radiate joy. Now it's true that Kenyans are a gracious people. They are warm and friend, and quick to laugh and quick to smile.

So it could be that Wangari's joy was a natural part of growing up in Kenya. But maybe it ran deeper than that. Maybe her joy was rooted in her work planting trees.

For Wangari Maathi's mission in life was to plant trees. Lots and lots and lots of trees. And so she founded what became known as the Green Belt movement.

If you Google it, you'll find that the Green Belt Movement was originally organized to encourage and help rural women all across Kenya to plant trees.

That did several things all at the same time. Planting trees served to combat the deforestation and widespread erosion that were rapidly degrading Kenya's beautiful landscape.

It also gave the women easy access to their main source of fuel for cooking, so it cut down on the time they spent gathering wood. Plus, the trees produced a wide variety of marketable products, which gave the women an income source.

Maybe most importantly, Ms. Maathai also incorporated advocacy and empowerment for women in her movement, teaching them the basic principles of democracy.

The Greenbelt movement transformed the landscape of Kenya, and the lives of the women who participated in it.

The effects were huge but it started out as a tiny seed of an idea: I will plant trees. That seed quickly grew: I will teach other women to plant trees.

And that seed grew and grew and grew.

The seed was love: love for her country, love for the women of Kenya, and love for the earth itself.

But the fruit of that seed, was, I believe joy. Joy knowing millions of Kenyan women now lived better lives because of those trees. Joy knowing that those trees were helping to heal and protect the land itself, and to restore God's beautiful creation.

Closer to home, you might also ask Pastor Kevin Bates' about the connection between loving the earth-- caring for creation, if you prefer -- and the experience of joy.

Keven is the pastor of Piney Mountain United Methodist Church -- a small congregation right here in the mountains of WNC.

Kevin has had a long personal interest in the connection between food, health and ecological well-being.

So the idea of loving the earth has always been important to him, and caring for creation has always come naturally.

But getting others to share that love, and to put that love into practice, is a different thing altogether, especially when the people you're trying to nudge in that direction are members of a small rural congregation who are suspicious of high-falutin theories like climate change, and trendy programs like recycling--something you'd only do if you lived in Asheville.

But Kevin felt strongly that he at least needed to try. He took the first steps down this road from the pulpit.

He did a six-part sermon series on creation care, looking at it through the lens of Biblical passages. He started in Genesis and showed his rural congregation how in the Bible's own story of creation God is portrayed as a gardener.

Then he moved on to stories from the prophetic books where this same gardening God is unhappy with the people for abusing or neglecting creation.

Many of the members of the Piney Grove church were farmers themselves. They understood the truth of these stories in their bones.

Kevin has noted that the deep connection to the land felt by his parishioners allows them to feel and respond to climate change on an emotional level:

“My people have noticed that they have changed when they plant in the ground, and they have even changed the way they fertilize because of changing snow patterns,” he says.

Pastor Kevin Bates planted seeds of love for the earth, and they have grown into all kinds of programs in his church centered on caring for creation:

- **distributing LED lightbulbs to the community to cut down on carbon emissions and the cost of high utility bills**
- **teaching classes on how to compost,**
- **teaching classes on how to can and preserve fresh fruits and vegetables so they don't go to waste.**

Taking all those things together, Kevin sees his congregation as a kind of demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God, a garden where all sorts of seeds are planted, and where joy -- the joy of knowing that God's creation is being lovingly cared for, the joy of watching people's lives change for the better -- where this joy is one of the main fruits he and his members grow together.

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So, in the spirit of Jesus's Farewell discourse: we leave you with a variety of exhortations today:

Abide in God's love, and stay rooted in that vine, for it is the source of our life together. And love one another, as Christ commands.

Love God, love your friends, and love your neighbors.

And love your mother the earth, so that your joy might be complete, and so that, as a congregation, you, too, might be a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God on earth.

Amen