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**“Complete Joy”**  
John 15:9-17

This past week I had a day, Thursday, which was both BUSY and WONDERFUL. **‘Busy’** because I had the privilege of participating in not just ONE, but TWO observances on the National Day of Prayer. First, a clergy breakfast followed by some public prayer time with many of my colleagues in the Welsh area, out in front of City Hall under God’s beautiful creation of ‘trees and skies.’ And then, after a quick hop down I-10, (as some of you have seen), I had the opportunity to have a delicious lunch with many friends from both church and community as we listened with great interest to the nationally-renowned speaker, former legal editor for the Chicago Tribune and Christian apologist, Lee Strobel. (Who, from the first words he uttered, is most certainly a native of ‘CHI-CAHGO’... ☺) Aside from the rewarding fellowship and good food (both for physical and spiritual body), what was so **wonderful** was to appreciate what a pleasure it is to serve in two communities which are both so open & welcoming to public expressions of the Christian faith.

Have you ever stopped to think just how blessed we are to be surrounded by such a ‘great cloud of witnesses’ to that beloved faith of ours? Because, believe it my friends, not EVERYONE in the rest of these ‘not-so’ United States is so ‘congenial’ to this ‘fellowship of followship’ of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, a recent study by the Barna Group, a Christian polling, statistical organization, indicated that some **45% of non-believers in the U.S. categorize Christianity as an ‘extremist’ belief.** ‘Extremist.’ Now who do YOU normally associate that word with?) Christians today can be perceived as bigoted, out of touch, homophobic, intolerant and a danger to society. Simply put, not much FUN to be around.

And even from the perspective of those who DO believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, not ALL of our fellow believers can be ‘much fun to be around.’ We KNOW in our hearts how Jesus commands us to “love one another” ... but sometimes that is a lot easier SAID than DONE! (I KNOW that you want to say ‘AMEN!’) And what does Jesus say about just WHY He has given us such difficult commands to obey? ***“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)***

Jesus is telling His disciples... US... that the reason that He gives us ‘commandments,’ ‘directives,’ ‘rules to live by,’ is NOT in order to prove our loyalty through our obedience. It is NOT

because God wants us to be like so many 'marionettes' on a string, moving just like He wants us to. Jesus declared that 'I have said these things to you SO THAT (remember, one of those 'traffic light' words to pay attention!) **"my joy may be in you."** In another translation, **"that my joy might REMAIN in you."** And not only that the 'joy' of some distant God, or historic figure Jesus, might be in us and remain with us, but that **"YOUR joy might be complete."** That your joy might be finished, not lacking in anything. Or in some other words, that your joy might be **FULL**, up-to-the-brim, **overflowing**.

So, in general, how well do you think we Christians live UP to... or live IN to... this promise of our Lord Christ's? I personally think that, in general, we do not live NEARLY as much a joyful life as we should. WHY is that? Because we're 'Presbyterian,' who take such pleasure in faith as an 'academic' exercise we discount the 'joyful' exercise part? Is it because we rely so much on God as that 'strong tower' we forget the Scripture that says **"the JOY of the Lord is my strength?"** Perhaps. But here's another plausible explanation... this by a pastor in Tulsa, OK, named Jim Johnston, **"Why are So many Christians Unhappy?"** :

"The most miserable Christians I've seen are those who live with a foot in both worlds. They hedge their bets. They have one eye on heaven and one on earth. They call on the name of Christ, but they still try to find security, satisfaction, pleasure, or fulfillment from this world. They're riding the fence. And they're not happy."

To me, Pastor Johnston's assessment speaks to those words of Jesus during the teachings of the 'BE-ATTITUDES.' **"No one can serve two masters."** (Matthew 6:24) Do we rely on the 'Joy of Jesus'? Or, on the 'Whims of the world'? If we focus on the latter, at the expense of the former, we are the type of non-committal followers spoken of in the Divine prophecy given to John in Revelation 3:16 (!): **"...because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."** Not easy words to hear...

If you were to draw a big hot tub of bathwater, and when you stuck your foot in, it was lukewarm, what would you do? Quickly pull your foot out and put in some more hot water... 'cause a less than hot experience is most disappointing. So just think how God feels about our lukewarm, half-hearted living out of our baptismal identity... To quote a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Presbyterian minister Maltbie Davenport Babcock (author of that popular hymn **"This is My Father's World"**): **"The Christian life that is joyless is a discredit to God and a disgrace to itself."** (Tho' I'm not sure that THIS picture displays a lot of 'JOY'... ☺)

SOOO, just how do we go about living a JOYFUL Christian life that is NOT a 'discredit to God' and a 'disgrace to itself?' How do we put more JOY into a life in order that it may be more 'hot,' more 'on fire' for our Lord Jesus? How do we raise the temperature of our spiritual 'water.' One is to spend more time around enthusiastic, joyful Christians whose passion for the Lord burns bright. Like many of us did this past Thursday. OR, as we were reminded on National Day of Prayer, that 'one day a year' what we should be doing the other 364, we need to spend more time in PRAYER! OR... spend more time in Scripture, being reminded by God's Words to YOU of all that you have to be joyful about. There were several in the passage we've considered today from John...

First and foremost, take JOY in the fact that **God loves YOU!** YES, little old you! Warts, faults, gripes and all. How do we know? By having been given the most tangible gift of love ever given: ***"No one has greater love than this, (than) to lay down one's life for one's friends."*** (John 15:13) When we think of those individuals we hold in highest esteem, there is likely no group more highly respected than that of our armed forces, both military and law enforcement. Why? Because of the unselfish nature in which they so willingly put themselves in harms ways for their fellow man. And if we can so fervently 'back the blue' or shout 'hooray for the red, white and blue' worn by our servicemen and women, how much MORE should we joyfully celebrate the One who gave His life for our ULTIMATE victory? Not over a human enemy, but over that 'ancient foe who seeks to work us woe.' We do not have to fear earthly **death** because Jesus laid down his heavenly **life**. And if THAT's not a reason for JOY, I don't know what is...

Our reason for JOY, however, should go well beyond mere **obligation** for Jesus 'saving our butts'...or more accurately, our SOULS. Our gratitude to God... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... should be grounded in more than keeping us from becoming a **victim** of the Evil One. But rather, in helping us to become a **friend** of the Holy One. Our JOY is made complete not only in our redemption through Christ... but in our relationship with Christ.

Jesus said to His disciples, ***"I do not call you servants... but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you."*** (John 15:15-16) Rather than 'Lord' over us an onerous sense of servitude for the clear obligation we should have for saving us from death, instead Jesus calls you and me ***"friend"***... one with whom He shares the innermost thoughts and convictions of His heavenly Father. A friend who is never too busy to take our call... A friend who will be truthful to

us, even though it hurts us BOTH... a friend who, when He says 'If there's anything you ever need, just ask,' really MEANS it!

A relationship with Jesus is NOT simply fearing what death would be without Him... but rather, what LIFE would be without Him. A relationship that declares to the world... and to one another... *"What a Friend We have in Jesus!"* As I look back on that wonderful talk that Lee Strobel gave this past week, perhaps what will stay with me the longest was what he closed his presentation with: *"Jesus is your helper... your leader... your best, best, best, best friend."*

As you and I consider just 'what a friend we have in Jesus'... one who laid down His life for His friends... may we do so with JOY. And that when our joy may seem to be hard to come by, we need to pay attention! I was reminded of the use of canaries in coal mines to warn the laborers of dangerous gases. That as long as they were chirping and singing, all was OK. But when they stopped, workers knew that they were in **trouble**. So too is it with our Christian JOY. When our **heart** stops **singing**, we must know it to be a **warning** to us... and a stumbling block to others. In the words of a Roman Catholic brother, Mark Hart:

*"An annoyed and joyless Christian is the devil's greatest billboard."*

If you are finding yourself 'annoyed' or 'joyless', let me offer up an 'antidote' for that 'illness': **Presbyterian Pilgrimage**. I can tell you from personal experience of how it serves to remind us of the two 'character traits' of God we have considered today: **LOVE** and **JOY**. And to give you a little 'foretaste' of that 'heavenly banquet' of Love and Joy to be found up in 'Woodworth,' I'll leave you with a song that we sing during this 'weekend to remember': ***"This is my commandment, that you love one another, that your joy may be full."*** [invite cong. to join] And it is those words that I pray for you all: 'Love one another, that your joy may be full.' And may all God's children say, 'AMEN!'