

Sixth Sunday of Easter – 2024

Acts 10:34-48

1 John 5:1-8

John 15:9-17

Are you a happy person? Not everyone is; and I'm not trying to make anyone here feel "less than." But it's a legitimate question – are you a happy person? Christians have a lot to be happy about, a lot to celebrate, but we also have our crosses to bear. Not every day is sunshine and rainbows and unicorns for a Christian, but for the most part Christians seem to be a fairly upbeat bunch. Why is that? Do you ever wake up in the morning and tell yourself: Today, I'm going to try my best to be a nice person? Nice is such a colorless word. Nice is the dictionary's version ordering vanilla ice cream at Baskin Robbins. Are you a pleasant person? Do you make others feel good when you're in their company? Are you engaging, self-giving, personable? **There is a TREMENDOUS hope in you**, a hope that is born of Christ's resurrection, born of the Holy Spirit, born of grace and blood and sacrifice and triumph and glory. Does that hope shine in you? This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine – is that you?

Is there something different about Christians? Does faith "set us apart" from other people, from those who aren't believers in the Lord Christ? There was a hymn that came out of the 1960's, a catchy tune with a memorable line: They will know we are Christians by our love. It's a beautiful sentiment. Is it true? The hymn is repetitive: "We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord" and then it emphasizes this great hope that Christ's love, in us, will be known to those around us. *They will know we are Christians by our love.* The line is an echo of what Tertullian, an early church father who lived from 160 to 240 AD, wrote. "The heathen were wont to exclaim with astonishment: 'Behold, how these Christians love one another, and how they are ready to die for one another.'" It's a beautiful sentiment. It is true? What is it that we have? What is it that sets us apart?

Jesus professed His love to His disciples. No question, this love is the catalyst for Christianity itself. Love is crucified to save the beloved. God renders up His life for lost sinners. This love is a power that has reshaped the lives of men, changed us at our core, reconstituted those who were perpetually curved in on themselves. Christ's love grips the heart and invades the soul. That love washed you in Holy Baptism. That love is conveyed to you through the Gospel of Christ's life, a life lived for you, a life that is even now being given to you. Love is the banquet of redemption, the banquet of forgiveness which comes to you in Jesus' body and blood. You are His disciple and He has loved you as the Father has loved Him. That love is your home. That love is your garment and your guide and your defense and your home. Jesus gives an admonition, an imperative word that you are not stray from His love, not to abandon Him. "Abide in my love" (John 15:9). That's simple, direct, and crucial. Abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Now that's a strong word: commandments. What do you hear when you hear that word? Grudging obedience, doing stuff that you don't want to do, being unjustly accountable to a demanding authority, losing your autonomy – there's lots of fairly unhappy things that people think when they hear the word commandment. Isn't it interesting that the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Divine Man who rendered up His life for you in love then connects joy to this whole enterprise? "These

things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Joy; is Jesus lying about this? Joy, in keeping Christ’s commandments; is He for real? Turning the other cheek to let someone humiliate me? Loving those who hate me? If some dirtbag Roman soldier makes me carry his baggage for one mile then I’m supposed to volunteer to carry it for two miles and this extra roadwork is going to give me joy?

Do you know what part of you rebels against God’s commands? That’s too easy a question. How many of y’all have ever caught yourself mid-sentence because you were about to tell a lie and your conscience wouldn’t allow it? How many of y’all wanted to hear the juicy gossip but you excused yourself from the conversation because you know that the Eighth Commandment forbids you from hurting your neighbor’s reputation? Does following your sinful nature ever give you joy? It’s your sinful nature that rebels against God’s commands. Here is a priceless line. Put this line through the filter of your lived experience in order to evaluate its veracity: “I have not let my Lord’s love have its way with me, and so my love for others has failed” (Individual Confession and Absolution – Lutheran Service Book, pg. 292). St. John tells us that God’s commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). Do you believe that? Are love and joy and obedience correlated? Is Christ’s life invading your own, invading your behavior, a source of joy for the believer? “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:3-5).

Every day, you are in a triumphal procession (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). Resurrection surrounds you. Forgiveness defines you. A new life, not the world’s vain life, but Christ’s life leads you out into your vocation where you deal with real people who are to be loved. A triumphal procession; you and your faith are the aroma of Christ to the people around you. Have you ever seen those high church types who have a censer, a vessel for burning incense connected to a chain, and during the Divine Service they swing this censer so that the incense is liberally spread throughout the church and the aroma of the incense saturates the assembly? That’s what God is doing through Christians, spreading the aroma of Christ. You are the fragrance of Christ. When you love one another, God is spreading the aroma of Jesus and His sacrifice into the world. Knowing that, doing that, brings joy the soul. A cheerful giver – that is what brings joy. I *absolutely believe* that God’s commandments are not burdensome, except to my sinful nature, which is to be crucified and die anyway (Galatians 5:24). My sinful nature prevents me from having joy. My sinful nature knows nothing of love, nothing of sacrifice, nothing of God’s glory. God loves a cheerful giver. What do we have to give cheerfully? Love.

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). That is the love that is in you; Christ’s love. His is the sacrifice that was offered, a fragrant offering that covered the stench of our sin. Laying down His life that you might have a new life, a heavenly future, a holy life full of God’s goodness and grace and power. He doesn’t give and remove His love from you based on how well you perform your duties or how beautiful your prayers might be. Christ is risen from the dead. He is alive and present and He tends your soul with His sacrifice; from this He does not waver. There is no greater love than His. He is the author and perfecter of love. He is using you to love those around you. That brings joy. In a myriad of ways, you lay down your life for others – I know it. That brings joy. To be a vessel of

Christ's sacrificial fragrance for the world; that brings joy. Be that person. He commands it (John 15:17). By this all men will know that you are Christ's disciples (John 13:35). And you will have joy (John 15:11).