

Easter 5B John 15:9-17

A few preliminary reflections on happiness before we turn to v.11 of our Gospel:

Whoever said money can't buy happiness didn't know where to shop.

Gertrude Stein

Happiness is good health and a bad memory.

Ingrid Bergman

Money can't buy you happiness but it does bring you a more pleasant form of misery.

Spike Milligan

Some cause happiness wherever they go; others, whenever they go.

Oscar Wilde

I want to draw our attention today to verse 11 from our Gospel: *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 NRSV)

As I read that verse, it reminds me that when Jesus Christ wants to do anything in us and for us, he doesn't stop with halfway measures. He does not just want to give us joy he wants to make sure we are completed with that joy. Joy is anything that brings us delight, happiness, and even wonder. From the First Sunday in Lent and continuing right through today's Gospel, some form of joy has been present, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Remember that Jesus said one of the reasons he was who he was and did what he did was so that we could live life more abundantly. When he speaks of joy, he is speaking of something far different than the understanding we tend to read into this of just being happy. For lack of another way of putting it, joy for Jesus is the difference between living life and living that life the way it should be lived.

Another way of putting it would be to say that happiness in our lives, and therefore in our calling, tends to be based on circumstances that are often beyond our control. But joy is often present despite difficult circumstances.

The world in which we live is often defined by "stuff." By that I mean that we have become a nation of possessions. For some people those possessions may be visual: a new car, nice home, and fashionable clothing. For others the most important possession is wealth and for far too many people the acquisition of more property or wealth is a continuous struggle. They become defined by that struggle. Usually when these same people get that one more thing, whatever that thing may be, they are no more satisfied than they were before getting whatever it was they were seeking. For many people the belief that more stuff brings you happiness is based upon the false notion that possessions can reduce anxiety, fear, and worry. They certainly can make you feel good for a while but in and of themselves they have no real healing properties at all. In the end they are objects, plain and simple.

The joy Christ offers is not based on fleeting circumstances, having its sure foundation in Christ the rock and the promises of God. So we find a definition for joy not in abundance of possessions or ease

of living but in something which sees beyond and reaches beyond those things. For those who have found true joy, we find powerful statements of faith like this one:

“Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation.

— Habakkuk 3:17-18

Think what those circumstances meant to an Israelite of biblical times. With no crops in the fields and no flocks in the stalls, the writer is basically saying, “I have been devastated.” Yet he speaks of joy in the Lord. Joy will carry us beyond all our circumstances.

Someone once said that “happiness lifts the emotions while joy lifts the soul.” This is an observation that is much easier seen than put into words but we know it when we see it. We have all known people who can seem to be filled to overflowing with happiness one minute and the next they are filled with anxiety. However, we have all known people who, despite lousy circumstances, seem to be filled to overflowing with real joy that seems to come from deep within their souls.

Observing someone with this joy that seems to manifest itself despite what is going on around them can be a wonderful life lesson. Usually the main difference between people filled with real joy and those who only have that surface sort of joy is found in the person’s ability to share that joy with others.

It follows then that more often than not happiness happens, while our sense of joy is something we choose for our lives. Abraham Lincoln said, “Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” I believe he spoke more about what I define as joy, a deeper and more settled form of happiness. Happiness seems to result from some physical event or circumstance that produces the feeling of happiness; but joy is happiness that has found its true centre.

C.S. Lewis said the following in *Mere Christianity* “God designed the human machine to run on Himself (God). He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just **no** good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

Lewis seems to be saying that there is no happiness apart from our connection to God. And if our happiness comes from anything other than God it will not last and will not have the desired effect we want for our lives.

There is an important distinction to be made here. Happiness tends to focus on “things” but joy focuses on people, individually and collectively as in the church. Jesus is saying that he has told us the things he has said so that we might be filled with joy. If you look back at this part of John’s Gospel and other chapters you will find that the focus of the teachings Jesus has shared with us are all about how we do or do not “abide” in the love offered by him to us. The message is filled throughout with the proclamation that Jesus is the very source of our joy. Whatever joy we internalise apart from him will leave us feeling empty. Our fullness of joy will come in direct correlation to our ability not to allow the world to interfere with our staying focused on Jesus and Jesus only.

So we come to the conclusion that happiness is more often connected with our getting something while joy seems to find its life in being given away! If we go through life spending all our efforts on getting stuff we think will bring us happiness, we are going to be disappointed. Sadly, in current times almost everything that seems to be of value is time stamped. By that I mean that be it a new computer or a new iPad, its newness, its technological wonders, will last only a short period of time. They are designed to be quick fixes and they are built to fill a void but only for a short period of time. Those who rely on the latest technology are often the people with very short attention spans and that lack of patience is exactly what the manufacturers want. They want you to be happy, albeit for only a short period of time. They do not want you filled with joy.

Our wanting to have things to make us happy can, and often does, become an obsession. In the end, we usually find that those things we think will become the happiness we are seeking will not make us happy over the long run. It seems all of life has become a sprint and not a marathon. You know the story of the tortoise and the hare. We need to be more like the tortoise. Being careful may slow us down but we will always stay in the race and continue to seek joy in our lives.

One of the most time tested television and movie titles were those created by Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek* being the pre-eminent of his many works. Those of you who became *Star Trek* fans, or Trekkies, will be familiar with the character, Mr. Spock. Mr. Spock was a Vulcan and as such he was able to keep his emotions in check and use only logic to solve problems. The word happiness or feeling of happiness would not have fit into his life. He did, however, have an ability to understand how emotions affected the human ability to function well. Mr. Spock said the following, “There seems to be more satisfaction in *wanting* than in *having*, it is illogical but it is true.”

Even Jesus did not suggest that there was no joy in receiving but Jesus did say, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” The difference is like the difference at Christmas between opening presents you have received and watching someone else open a gift that you have given them. They both produce a happy response but the feeling produced by having given is of a much deeper quality. It seems that our Lord wants us to understand that happiness is made manifest in the things that we can see while joy focuses on that which cannot be seen.

Jesus kept his eyes focused on the will of God and the good that would result from his perfect sacrifice. Because of that sacrifice we who would follow him now can look at the world through “resurrection eyes.” We can, because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, be filled with the joy that came from sacrifice. We can, as it has been said before, “walk the walk and talk the talk,” because Jesus has already made the pathway passable. Because we are able to see with eyes other than the physical ones we see the world with, we are able to see and understand with resurrection eyes that the journey of joy must necessarily be a journey of faith. It is only by faith that we can be joyful in spite of our circumstances, it is only by faith that we can make joy a daily choice, it is only by faith that we get our focus off of the world of physical things and onto Jesus the source of our joy, and it is only by faith that we can see the invisible beyond the visible. *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 NRSV) Amen

Fr Robert Newton