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Springboro, Ohio

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Series: “The Gifts of Easter”

Message: The Gift of Joy

Scripture: John 15:1-17

 During this season of Easter we are unpacking and figuring out how to incorporate the gifts that we receive from the death and resurrection of Jesus into our daily lives. To help guide us, we’re using Jesus words from John 13-17 as our instruction manual.

 Today we are looking at John 15:1-17, and thinking about the gift of joy. As we think about the context, these words of Jesus on joy seem out of place. They seem out of sync. Perhaps, they even seem out of touch with reality.

 We often describe our reality with negatives: moral decay, apathy, racism, sexism, poverty, violence, abuse, broken relationships, profound sorrow. These are a part of the world we live in.

 And that was the disciples’ reality as well. Jesus has mentioned being troubled several times. We know that they will experience, and Jesus will experience rejection, betrayal, hatred, violence, and abandonment.

 And yet in the midst of this, Jesus begins to talk about joy, the complete opposite of all these realities. Karoline Lewis writes, “True joy is hard to come by, sometimes seems impossible when we start down the road of real life.”

 But in the midst of real life, Jesus says to his followers, “I tell you these things so that my joy might be with you and your joy might be complete.”

 So the first and perhaps the most important thing we can claim from this scripture passage is that joy is possible. Joy is possible even when life isn’t perfect, even when our hearts are breaking, even when there are all sorts of problems around us, joy is not only possible, but a present reality with us.

 When we remain connected to Jesus—the way that vines and branches are connected to reach other—one plant, we are given the gift of joy.

 Joy is possible. Joy is present. Joy is Jesus’ gift to us.

 Sometimes we have to look for it. It gets covered up by the other packaging of life. It gets pushed out of the way by all the drama of life. But it is there.

 We have to look for it. We have to get it out and use it. And we have to protect it. It is a gift of great value and there are many who would like to steal our joy.

 So we want to do these things today—to find this gift of joy and to commit ourselves to living it and using it, which is actually the best way to protect it.

 The first thing we need to do it to stay connected to Jesus. We have to be connected to him like branches are connected to the vine. Another, more familiar way to think about this is in terms of friendship. Joy comes when we maintain and enjoy our friendship with Jesus. Like any friendship, we have to spend time with him and share our lives with him and be real with him.

 Jesus tells us that he has chosen us as his friends. He says, “I no longer call you servants…instead, I have called you friends” and everything that the Father has shared with me, I’m sharing with you. Because good friends share everything, especially the best stuff. Friends love each other unconditionally. They accept each other fully. They help each other. Jesus describes friendship in this way, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

 The old song says, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” But friendship goes two ways. He keeps showing up, waiting for us, giving his life for us. We will find new joy when we respond and share everything with Jesus as our friend, and when we become friends with his friends. A part of sharing in friendship with someone is getting to know and care about their friends. And so friendships with each other that reflect and help strengthen our friendship with Jesus and vice versa are important.

 We need friends around us to love and cherish and laugh and cry with and while we do, we feel Jesus’ friendship in an even more powerful way. We need friends who love us enough to tell us that we have lettuce in our teeth or egg on our face and who we love and trust enough to listen to.

 This leads to pruning. Now pruning doesn’t sound like a very joy filled thing. It actually sounds quite painful. But pruning, when done by those who know what they are doing, can make all of the difference and actually reduce future pain. Good, healthy pruning can led to new growth and areas of growth. It can restore health and vitality to a plant and to our lives.

 And we need that, don’t we? Left to our own choices, we are like plants. We get out of balance. We don’t invest our time or effort in the best outcomes. We’re afraid to stop something we’ve always done or to start something new.

 But when we let a trustworthy friend in, like Jesus, or a friend who knows his ways well, and let them help prune us in love, it makes such a difference. They see the areas we are hurting ourselves in and they call us on it. They see the places where we could grow and make an impact on the world around us, and they encourage us. They believe in us.

 Friendship is based on love and being willing to be part of the pruning process. It is also listening when others are giving you this gift that is often hard to hear and do. But what a gift we miss if we don’t.

 Joy comes through trusting Jesus and friends who also embody this greater love he talks about to prune us. Strangers have opinions, but they are not based on knowing us or our context or loving us as friends. But friends like Jesus will prune us to be our best—so that we can produce fruit.

 And joy comes in producing fruit. It you’ve ever grown fruit, it is an amazing process. It is something that comes from the vine and branches, completely connected at one point. And yet, it’s not meant to stay there. If it does, it is wasted as it rots on the branches.

 As we look at this passage, we are reminded that our fruit as Christians is the work of love, of being the kind of friend to all that Jesus was. Our fruit grows out of our connection with Jesus. But in the end it is not for us. It is mean to be given away. We produce this fruit and give it away as Jesus does to make the world a better place, so that others might have a taste of what God’s Kingdom of love is like.

 Joy comes when we share this fruit of love. Think about the joy you have in a job well done, when you help someone out, when you do the right thing. There is joy deep within that wells up in us when we give.

 We can’t do it on our own. When we do, we think we need praise, recognition, something in exchange for it. But when we produce the fruit of love and give it away freely, we receive something even better in its place—the gift of joy.

 Nadia Boltz Weber reflects on this difference. She says, we all like our independence—to do it ourselves. But, “the Christian life is not like that. It’s a viney, branchy mess of us and Jesus and others. We are dependent on God and one another.” And when we are, there is a pruning and there is fruit, and there is joy.

 We cannot fix the world, but God can and God does. This is what Easter is all about. We have a Savior and when we are connected, one with him, he gives us joy in the assurance of God’s victory. He grows in us fruit to share—fruit filled with the seeds of the Kingdom of God.

 Thanks be to God!