

Sermon Easter 4 2020

May 3, 2020

John 16:16-22

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

As we hear our Lord speaking to His disciples in this lesson, we can see that the focus of it centers around that statement from Jesus: **“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”** There’s the back and forth of Jesus saying it, and the disciples conferring amongst themselves about it, then Jesus saying it again. In fact, John notes this phrase of “a little while” as occurring four times in these verses. **A little while and you will see me no longer, and again a little while and you will see me.** So what is Jesus saying here? Well, He finally clarifies it to say, **“So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”** In other words, there is joy when we see Jesus. Yes there is sorrow, there is grieving now. **Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.** But your sorrow will turn into joy. There is joy when we see Jesus.

As I hear that phrase, I think of what I hear so many of you say so well, “Pastor, I don’t know what I would do without my faith.” You’re so right. There are so many things that we experience in this life, and we realize that without our faith, understanding them and enduring them would be infinitely more difficult. There’s this understanding that there is joy when we see Jesus. And as I say that, I have to clarify, this doesn’t mean that we’re happy all the time. In fact, I am guessing that many of you know the old Sunday School song about “inright, outright, upright, downright, I’m happy all the time,” and some of you maybe also know I really don’t like that song. It’s because as Christians our faith doesn’t guarantee that we’ll be happy all the time. Sometimes we experience the hardships of sin, death, and the attacks of the devil and those are hard. Those create very unhappy circumstances. But there is still joy.

To make this a bit more concrete, as many of you know from my sermons, it’s not unusual for me to watch some sort of show while I exercise. It’s probably where I do most of my show watching. But this week I was watching a documentary about a dispute between these two men in North Carolina. You see one of the men had something that belonged to him which was purchased by the other in an auction at a storage facility. They’re fighting about who the rightful owner is. However, what was pertinent to the sermon is not the object, but the seeming motivation of the two men to want it. For the original owner, he seems to have associated it with the plane crash in which his father

died. He's presented as having the issue of never receiving validation from his father, and so he can't resolve that. In view of his father's death, now the object is something to cling to. For the other man, he's presented as having had an abusive father. In view of that abuse, he's also portrayed as having developed a personality which constantly seeks attention. For him, possessing the object is a means to garner attention. What's the point?

The point is that both of these men struggle with imperfect human fathers. They both wrestle with the consequences of the way that those fathers didn't raise them as they should. You could even say they grieve that, there's sorrow. As I watched this, I grieved for them. How sad. All the more, I see how they could have such greater peace, they could even have joy if they could see Jesus. If they could see the love that God has for them as we see it in the sending of His Son for our sins, then they would know joy. Maybe not happiness, but joy that gives them rest and peace. There is joy when we see Jesus.

Or think about what we're enduring with our sheltering-in-place. I know I've talked to a lot of you who have expressed a fair amount of contentment in these circumstances. And that's good, there's a sense in which we are called to be content in every circumstance. I know there are also a lot of you that are really wrestling with the authority of the government in the midst of this.

I thought in view of that this passage from 1 Peter was so interesting with regard to its timing. **Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.** As we hear those words, we understand that whether we agree or not, whether we think it just or not, our duty is to obey the orders of our government. Now, we do have to keep in mind how we go about this obedience. How is that? Look what it says: "as servants of God." This tells us that we do this knowing on the one hand that these institutions we have in place as our governing authorities are masks of God, they represent Him. But on the other hand, we also know that they are operated by humans who certainly err at times—or perhaps not even at times, but often. In view of that, we ultimately serve God. So what does that mean? It means that at a point we owe obedience to commandments 1-3, to having no other gods, to not misusing the Name of God, to keeping that Sabbath holy more than we do to the authorities in this life. However, as we consider that, we consider that in our current circumstances understanding that although the government

does not view us as essential, the preaching of the Word and the giving of the Lord's body and blood are essential to the life of the church. We may rightly modify that, as we are for the love of our neighbor, but those are not to be utterly discontinued.

But here's the connection: in view, then, of the modifications we're currently experiencing, what's our life like? Well, I made the connection on Maundy Thursday to the life of the Israelites in exile. As the Babylonians carried the Israelites from the temple, they mourned. They grieved. As it says in Psalm 137: **"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."** And so we should grieve. As content as we might be in our circumstances. As thankful as we can even be for the time that we have with our family, and that families are having this time to pause and to hopefully refocus away from all the things that distract us from our Lord and faithfulness to Him, it's still a time to grieve. The fact that I can't be with you all face to face, that hurts. The fact that I can't give all of you the body and blood of Jesus here in this sanctuary together as one family, that's sorrowful. If that doesn't grieve you, it should.

I saw a post on Facebook from someone who was of another confession. That person was sort of chastising people for grieving this. They were saying that we have these electronic means to hear the preaching of the Word, and so they literally said, "it's the same thing!" No. It's not the same thing! The body of Christ when He came to this earth was incarnate. It was in the flesh. Yes, thanks be to God that we worship in Spirit and Truth, and so even though the body of Christ is fractured this place and that place, we are united in the Spirit. Thanks be to God for that. But it's not the same thing. You all know it doesn't feel the same to see my face on the screen. I have Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting right now. It's not the same. As one of my professors in seminary said, when you see Jesus in His ministry, He came to people flesh to flesh. And now His body rightly gathers flesh to flesh. Why? Because there is joy there when we see Jesus.

But as we speak of this grief, of this sorrow, we come back to Jesus' words again: **"So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."** We will be together again. We will see each other again. We will see Jesus in His body as we gather again, and there will be joy.

In fact, Jesus makes this connection to the mother giving birth. I know I just spoke of this during Lent, but it was after all this was going on and before we had services online, so I'll speak of it again. I remember when one of our kids was being born the labor got stuck. And it seemed like it was never going to end. It was really painful for my wife. For hours she was in this spot, in the highest point of the birth pangs. But eventually the child was born. All of that pain, all of that suffering was not being

remembered. Why? As Jesus said, **“When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.”**

Yes, Christians, **“So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”** There is joy when we see Jesus. There is the joy of knowing that despite the grief of this world, He has borne it out of love for us. Despite the sorrows of this world, He has overcome them that we would have the victory. Despite the loss we see in death and know in sadness, He is the One who promises that in His Kingdom He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

As I was reading for this passage this week, I found a commentator that said it this way, *“the theological function of [grief] is to show that death is not annulled but made into an act of salvation by the resurrection... [in other words, for the worldly grief] is the constant hampering of life and its ultimate extinction. But for Christians it is the constant liberation and growth of the power of life.*

Paul in His letter to the Corinthians says it a bit differently. In his second letter, he’s commenting about the first letter he wrote. And if you know that letter, you know there are some spots where he says some things that are hard to hear. Paul didn’t mince words. Apparently the Corinthian Church had let him know that they were grieved by some of this. So Paul says, **“As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.”** In other words, he’s making the point that as we grieve in this life, it drives us to repentance. Properly, then, repentance drives us to Jesus. This leads us to salvation without regret. It leads us to Jesus. There is joy when we see Jesus.

Of course all of this joy that we will know when we see Jesus ultimately is the joy we will know when we see Him face to face. In the meantime, we have the joy of seeing Him by faith. We have the joy of seeing Him in the forgiveness He speaks to us in His Word. We have the joy of knowing His promises to us as we see Him uniting us to Himself in baptism, we have the joy of tasting and seeing that goodness in His body and blood in His holy supper. There is joy when we see Jesus.

And thankfully we have the promise that the grieving we have is only for a little while. On the one hand we know that the grief we have of our current circumstances won’t last forever. It’s likely that it won’t be much longer in a temporal sense. But even if it should last until our Lord calls us to Himself or returns, it will still only be a little while. Thankfully that little while is not long compared to eternity with Him, because there is joy when we see Jesus. Amen.