### “Your Joy May Be Complete,” May 6, 2018

**John 15:9–15**

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. . . . 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer , because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

**1 John 5:2, 4**

2By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. . . . 4 This is the victory that conquers the world: our faith.

So there’s a whole lotta love, here! And there’s a very important lesson about God that we can’t afford to miss. This is that there is no difference between the Father’s love and the Son’s love. Of course, the Father and the Son are distinct persons, but they have the same love, the same attitude.

Jesus says he loves us AS the Father loves him. And *we* are to love one another AS Jesus has loved us.

It’s a circuit of love that flows from the Father, through the Son, into us, and then *among* us. This is central to the whole revelation that Jesus made: that there is this circuit of love, and that that the Father’s attitude is no different from the Son’s. The Father is not stern and remote, while the Son is loving and close. Rather, God is loving and inviting, just as Jesus is.

This is crucial, and many well-meaning Christians don’t get it. It’s wrong to assume that the Son has to persuade the Father to save us. Rather, “the Father himself loves you,” says Jesus in the next chapter of John (16:27).

I know this goes against the old notion of God as burning with wrath, and ready to punish: a God who must be feared. But this fearful and pessimistic view of God is not what we find in the Gospel. The good news is the circuit of love that goes from God to Jesus to us, and then back to God again. This is the good news, which overcomes the world.

Jesus says “abide in my love” (John 15:9). We can *live* in his love! Once we do that, then we relax. We cease to be afraid of God! And *that’s* when our joy can be complete (15:11).

Joy follows when you know you are loved. And if you have a strongly compassionate nature, you find it comforting to know that everyone is loved, and everyone has a chance to respond to God’s love.

Now, many believers want God to show favoritism, but that is a childish desire, which hopefully we will outgrow. Nevertheless, there are very real benefits to be had from being Jesus’ friend.

Now, the immediate benefits for his friends at that time were quite down to earth. Jesus says the greatest love is to die for one’s friends, and it turns out his death will buy some time for those friends. The authorities will think they have crushed the movement by killing its leader, and will be satisfied with that, for a while. The apostles will then be able to regroup and begin their ministry, after the Spirit comes on Pentecost.

Jesus makes it clear that they *are* his friends. They already know he is their leader, their father figure, their teacher, even their Savior. Now they need to accept that he is also their friend, like a wise older *brother*. Knowing that he is not going to lord it over them, or ask them to be mindlessly obedient, helps to banish fear. Jesus wants enlightened followers. He wants intelligent and free loyalty, not rigid conformity and thoughtless obedience.

He *is* our leader and Savior, but he is also our friend, so that we may relax and live as free and creative beings who voluntarily do the will of God. You see, we are children of God, but he also wants us to be *grownups* of God.

So, what is our love for each other supposed to be like? Should we disregard our own needs and ask people to stomp on us, as St. Francis once did, asking a follower to trample on his back? No, Jesus’ kind of love does not involve self-abasement. Jesus wants us to have a healthy self-respect.

In fact, you can’t really love in a healthy way if you don’t have self-respect. The two are linked. Without self-respect, love is twisted, and is probably motivated by an overwhelming neediness. “I don’t want no more of this crazy love,” Paul Simon sings. Crazy love sometimes seems exciting, but it’s dysfunctional, draining, and it’s not really love.

Okay, so let’s say you have self-respect, but aren’t really loving. Well, that’s not healthy either. That’s self-absorption. Jesus was very good at restraining self-respect in those who had too much of it (like some of the Pharisees), and restoring self-respect to those who had lost it (like the woman who trembled with fear when she touched the hem of his garment, but to whom Jesus said “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well” [Matt 9:22]). Jesus was building her up so her self-respect could be restored to normal. But he also bawled out some pompous religious people, so their self-respect could be *reduced* to normal!

One symptom of out-of-balance self-respect is when you hold grudges. This happens when you feel threatened, and are ready to either lash out or to flee. Healthy self-confidence does not need to resort to fight *or* flight.

When we are certain that we are loved, when we know that God is fair and loving—to everyone—then we are serene, our joy is complete.

Now, what is this extraordinary saying from the letter of John, “This is the victory that conquers the world: our faith” (1 John 5:4)? Is this actually possible? Apparently. We can overcome the cynicism and despair of the world, the feelings of hopelessness that the world can impart, and even the lesser problem of a dimming of enthusiasm.

There is a phrase from Acts that captures what this victory is like. Peter says “your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19–20). *Times of refreshing*: an experience of renewal, of encouragement, which is not just *momentary* but permanent, since it connects your present with your glorious future.

The real victory is had when you believe in unending spiritual growth, in eternal life—*here* and hereafter.

*This* is a faith that overcomes the world, that conquers the feeling of being dominated by the world. No matter how spiritual you are, or how many years of Christian faith you have under your belt, you can be assaulted by the failures and disappointments that the world dishes out. You can have someone bullying you in the workplace. You can have a neighbor who gossips about you. The person you love might be impatient with you and your feelings. There may be a million slings and arrows that you endure—and you may need to take corrective action.

But if you remember that Jesus has confidence in you, then you can endure through all the emotional ups and downs.

Then you can make the present a “time of refreshing.” You really bring some of the future into the present.

So what is our takeaway, today? Trust in God’s love, and in the reality of everlasting growth. Share the divine love with those around you, bringing a little bit of heaven to earth. And learn not only to *give* love, but to *receive* it. Receive love freely, without guilt. Then your joy may be complete. After all, Jesus calls you his friend.