

“Joy Remains with You”
John 14:15-20

In our Gospel reading for today, we encounter Jesus talking about the coming of the Spirit but I want to first go back a bit and set the historical context and the framework for the Gospel of John’s presentation of Jesus. John’s Gospel was probably written in the mid 90s; it is the last of the gospels included in our Bible to be written. In fact, it was probably written not by the Apostle John but rather a leader(s) in the community that John started. And so just like the other Gospels, there is a certain community associated with John’s Gospel. It is a community that has a certain history and has experienced significant life circumstances.

So if we briefly look back on the experience of John’s Community, we must start at the life of Jesus. Jesus’ followers experienced his stripping away by the hands of Rome. They lived through the terror of his brutal execution around the year 30. It was the end of the world for them but they said no it’s not. They didn’t let that event destroy their movement of hope. They experienced the Resurrection. They continued experiencing Jesus in their lives. They continued being who they were. They continued being Jews. They continued going to the Jerusalem Temple. They continued their fight for justice and for a voice in a conquered society ruled by the Romans.

And when the Jerusalem Temple, the center of Jewish life and worship, was destroyed in the year 70, John’s community could have thrown in the towel and given up. It was the end of the world for them but they said no it’s not. They moved from Palestine to Asia. They continued going to synagogues. They continued being, even without the Temple. They continued being, even in the face of a dominating Empire, a dominating Roman culture and lifestyle.

And then around the year 90 right before John’s Gospel was written, another conflict is ensuing - this time within Judaism. Members of John’s community, people we would call Christians, but whom actually still identified as Jews are thrown out of synagogues because of their beliefs about Jesus. And so yet again, it was the end of the world for them. Doubts were raised in their minds about hope for their world. They began asking themselves, “Who are we?” “Are we really experiencing the hope Jesus gave our community?” “How is Jesus present in our lives?” “How is God present in our lives?”

And it’s in this context that John writes to his community and essentially says that not only was Jesus resurrected, but before he was executed he promised us that if we loved one another, another helper and another advocate would come. In fact, that is part of how we experience resurrection power – through the Spirit which resides within us. We’ve been looking for Jesus to come back when in fact, Jesus is already here through the Spirit. John tells his community: Just as Jesus advocated for our causes and defended us over 60 years ago, that same Spirit is with us and abides with us wherever we go. God didn’t abandon us when Jesus was executed. God didn’t abandon us when the Temple was destroyed. God isn’t abandoning us now. It may seem like the end of the world, but it’s not. God has given us another comforter. This Spirit resides within us. She continues what Jesus did. She comforts us and advocates for us and tells us the truth that the joy of hope is still alive. John tells his community: don’t let the present hard time or life situation instill in your mind the lie that our lives are over. Listen to the Spirit within you that says otherwise. She’s a Spirit of Truth because she tells us the truth of who we are and how we can still have the joy of hope even if we’re kicked out of synagogues.

How many of us this morning were once kicked out of our houses of worship or our communities of faith or our very homes because of who we are or what we believed? Do you remember the pain you felt? The isolation? The confusion? The anger? It felt like the world was over, didn’t it? Some of us came away from those situations hurt and disillusioned. Our faith, our lives, our joy of hope may have been stripped away from us just as Jesus was stripped away from his followers. For some of us, it has taken our whole lives to try and retrieve that joy and happiness again. We might think to ourselves, if only we could have recognized that the Spirit was always there with us. Then, it might have caused less pain, sadness, anger and heartache in our lives. But we can also hear the good news that John is saying to his community – there is no need to fret about the past. God’s Spirit, the comforter, is with us and we don’t have to live in that sadness and unhappiness anymore.

Members from our church aren't here today because their doing the Aids Walk and many of us are supporting them. In this act we can see that we're not letting HIV/Aids steal our joy. When I did chaplaincy work in a Boston hospital, I got to meet a Haitian lady by the name of Jessie before she died of Aids. She was only in the hospital a few months but her condition was deteriorating rapidly. She told me that she contracted HIV from her husband who denied even having the virus and who also wouldn't get tested. Well, I remember when Jessie's little girl, Rose, would come visit her and Jessie's face would light up. She'd hug Rose and comfort her and read books to her. She'd tell her how beautiful she was and how she was going to grow up to be a strong woman. She'd tell her that even though she might not be physically with her for too much longer, she would always be with Rose – in her heart. I'm not sure Rose understood what her mother was saying, but Rose knew she would always have her mother's love. And what was so remarkable to me was that even though I could sense the pain and sadness in Jessie's and even in Rose's heart, I could still sense the joy of hope they both had with each other. It was joy that said, "We're not going to let Aids keep us from having hope in our future." The point being...choosing to be joyous and happy does not mean we deny feelings of tragic unhappiness and sorrow. When we lose loved ones or when everything seems to go wrong, it's okay to grieve and feel sad and angry and frustrated, but we don't have to stay that way and give up in life and lose our joy of hope.

There is no crisis or evil big enough to fully take away your joy. Even when the worst evil happens we can be sure that God hasn't abandoned us, but actually grieves and cries with us. But God doesn't stop there – through the Spirit of truth and joy within us, God works with us to create and bring about good from our difficult situations. No matter what the journey of life deals us...the less crises we encounter, the more tragedies we encounter, we can still hold on to the joy of hope. We may think we need lots of money, a stress and crisis-free life, and drama-free friends to hold on to joy, but in reality there are no conditions to the joy we can experience. Just as we can choose to experience God's Spirit in lives, we can choose to experience joy in our lives. We don't have to allow our life circumstances take away our joy.

John's community didn't let the death of Jesus take away their joy of hope. We don't have to let the death of our loved ones, take away our joy. John's community didn't let the fall of the temple steal their joy of hope. We don't have to allow the fall of the economy or a recession to steal our joy. John's community didn't allow persecution and Roman oppression to take away their joy of hope. We don't have to allow racist, sexist, or homophobia comments take away our joy. Don't let any addiction steal your joy. Don't let that job loss steal your joy or that home foreclosure or that bad break up or negative person or any one person's inappropriate behavior or that superficial "in the scene" culture that says you have to look a certain way to be attractive. Don't let your perceived imperfections keep you from experiencing joy in your life. My whole life I've had to deal with the fact that I have a big nose and having a big nose on the school playground was brutal. It gets hard to not let our perceived imperfections take away our joy. (I did drag once and I thought that I looked all pretty and that no one would recognize me. At first people saw me and said, "Who is that Aztec princess?" Then this one person took a look at my profile, and said, "Aw, that's Miguel with his 11 inches of nose." I wanted to beat him down. You all would have missed his Aunt Gladys stories! Luckily I didn't let it take away my joy.) Our perceived imperfections should not be a condition as to whether we're happy or not.

John's community didn't allow any perceived communal imperfections or any real life imperfections get them down. Just as members of John's community never lost the joy of seeing hope in their lives, we, through the Spirit of Truth, can experience the same joy, no matter what the journey of life brings. The good news is joy remains with us. Amen.