

The Secret to Abiding Joy

I heard a story this past week that blessed my heart. One of our members was out to dinner with his family at one of our local restaurants. While they were eating our brother noticed some commotion going on at a nearby table. Eventually the man at that other table got up and left, leaving his family without means to pay their bill. Prompted by the Lord, our brother called the waitress over and committed to pay for this other family's meal. He asked that the origin of this gift not be revealed to those who were receiving it. Our brother watched as the mother at the other table was informed that her bill had been paid. The tears of relief and gratitude that welled up in the woman's eyes, brought great joy to our brother's heart. He readily agreed with me when I suggested to him that his gift was a \$100 well spent.

After 36 years of ministry here at Fourth Street, I am seeing the kind of spiritual fruit that not many other pastors are privileged to see. In fact, when I am around some of my colleagues in ministry, I'm hesitant to tell them what some of you are doing. I don't want them to think I'm bragging or make them feel bad because they're not seeing among their people what I'm seeing among you.

Whether it's the brother who pays for a stranger's family meal, the young woman who donates a piece of her liver to extend the life of another, or the witness of devotion given to us by Wayne Blackie's Bible, I have the sense of walking among giants. Who am I that I should be called to serve among such as these?

Though our numbers in attendance at Morning Worship and in the offering plate are not always as strong as I would like to see them, there can be no doubt that God is still blessing us and raising up an extraordinary witness among us. Some of this stuff gives me spiritual "goose bumps," and reassures me that God isn't finished with us yet. Would you say, "**The best**" "**is yet to come!**"

I love the book of Isaiah. Although the first 39 chapters of Isaiah's prophecy are mainly prophecies of Judgment against the arrogance of the nations and against the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah, chapters 40 through 66 celebrate God's promise of redemption and restoration. Though God has found it necessary punish His people for their sins,

2

His ultimate plan is to bring them back to Himself and to pour out His blessings upon them.

Thus we read in Isaiah 55:10-13:

"The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth.

They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry.

It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.

You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands! Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow. Where nettles grew, myrtles will sprout up. These events will bring great honor to the Lord's name; they will be an everlasting sign of his power and love."

Though I enjoy the cooler weather of spring and fall, I love the fullness of our supernatural world in summer. I love sitting on my front deck and seeing the fresh new growth on my evergreen trees. I love to see and smell the flowers in full bloom and the birds busily going about the business of hatching and feeding their young. I love fresh picked raspberries and everything new and fresh from the garden.

In summer there is a great sense of fullness and abundance. God has set His table before us and bids us come and dine upon His creation. And, for those of us who have heard and believed the Word that God has sent out into the world in His Son, Jesus Christ, we have so much more. We have the knowledge that we are loved by the author of all love. We know that our sins have been atoned for through the shed blood and sacrificed body of our Savior. We know we have a place at the table in the Kingdom of God. We know we have been given everlasting life, life that that world didn't give us and life that the world can never take from us. We have been given the opportunity to live in peace and abiding joy. Would you say, "**We are so blessed!**"

But, though we may know that all of this is true, we have to admit that we don't always experience or live into the abundance that we have been given. We are past the law and the prophets. We live in the age of grace. The cross and open tomb of Jesus and holy flame of

3

Pentecost guarantee our inheritance. We stand on the shoulders of the great Christian apostles and martyrs who have come before us. Yet, we often find ourselves still struggling with doubt, many fears, and temptations to sin.

I don't know about you but I often have the sense of "almost but not quite." I feel almost free but not quite, almost empowered but not quite, almost at peace but not quite, almost confident in God's love but still nagged by irritating moments of doubt. I feel almost ready for absolute surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit but not quite. My sinful nature, though crucified with Christ, still beckons to me from its grave—dead but not silent, not quite.

Another way to describe this is that I am—and many other Christians are—like partially dammed up streams. In John 7:38, Jesus said, "Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" As believers, we have the Holy Spirit; we have the Living Water Jesus promises. And, that Living River within us wants to flow out of us to all the world. Would you say, "**It wants to flow!**"

This is absolutely true. Nevertheless, our doubts and fears clog the channel. We worry about God's provision coming through for us. We worry what other people will think of us. We doubt our worthiness and our ability to do ministry. We fear missing out on what the world promises, no matter how empty those promises are. In other words, the Devil has done a number on us. He clogs our pipes with his garbage and the River only trickles where God wants it to flow.

So, here's the question for this morning: How do we get rid of the garbage and loose the river? How do we get past the clog and on to the flow? In the 7th chapter of John, Jesus speaks about the river within us but by John 15 He changes the metaphor. Now the subject is spiritual fruitfulness and the central image is that of a branch gaining life from the vine. In John 15:1-4 Jesus says:

"I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce

fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.”

The secret to unleashing the River of God’s Spirit within us, and the secret to spiritual fruitfulness, is one in the same secret. It is to remain intimately connected to Jesus Christ; it is to remain in Him and to allow Him to remain in us. This we do by holding regular conversations with the Lord by reading and reflecting upon Holy Scripture. This we do through engaging the Lord in prayer that includes both speaking to the Lord and listening to His response. This we do by engaging in regular fellowship with other believers. This we do by faithfully participating in worship and in corporate study of His word; that is, attending together to the teachings of the Apostles. The more we are connected to the Lord in these ways, the more He will be able to prune from us those things that keep us from being fruitful for His Kingdom. The more we are connected to Him the more He will be able to remove the garbage that prevents the flow of that Holy River that wants so much to run through us.

Continuing on in John 15:5-8, Jesus says further:

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

A further question that may come to our minds is this: How much is enough? In other words, how are we to know that our connection with Jesus is as strong as it needs to be? How are we to know that our time in His word, prayer, worship, fellowship and so on is sufficient? According to John 15:5, the answer is found in the fruit. Or going back to John 7, we could also say that the answer is in the flow. And going back to Isaiah 55:11 we can say that the answer is in the motivation of God’s people for service.

When the Son of God, Word of God and Spirit of God are implanted in us to the degree that we become engaged in the ministry of God to

the people around us, we can then say that we have truly begun an authentic Christian journey. Until then we may be close but not quite.

The one thing I most want you to hear and take to heart this morning is that “close but not quite” is not enough. His mighty River must flow through us. Each branch is meant to bear much fruit. In partnership with Jesus Christ we are here to bring great glory to our Father in heaven. We are to bring great glory to God by effective prayers, loving service and by a generosity that causes the watching world to exclaim: Would you say, **“It must be God!”**

Finally this morning, look at the promise found in John 15:9-11: Jesus says, *“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!”*

How do we know when our devotion to God is enough? How do we know when we are abiding in Christ to the degree that we need to be abiding? Being motivated to serve? Yes. But even more is the abiding presence of joy. There is no greater joy than to experience the river of God’s love freely flowing into us and through us into the lives of others, no greater joy than the joy of bearing fruit for God’s kingdom.

Would you please stand? Now raise your hands into the air like this. The secret to abiding joy in the Kingdom of God is to receive the blessings of God with open arms. Now lower your arms and open your hands, palms up. The secret to abiding joy in the Kingdom of God is to receive the blessings of God with open arms and to share those blessings to others with open hands. I say open arms to receive and open hands to bless because we will always receive more from God than we can possibly give away to others. The more we open our hands to bless others, the more God will pour blessing into us. It’s impossible to out give the Lord.

Remember: open arms to receive and open hands to give. This is meant to be the normal flow of Christian living and to live in this flow is to live with abiding joy.

The Fourth Street Church of God

4thstcog.com

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for July 16, 2017 The Secret to Abiding Joy

Isaiah 55:10-13; John 15:1-11

Jon R. Neely, Pastor
neelyjon@gmail.com