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 "Complete Joy"
 May 17, 2009
 West Side Christian Church

John 15:9-17

I was reading *The Christian Century* this week and came across an amusing article on neologisms – new words that result from new inventions. For instance, the word *radar* emerged as an acronym for a “radio detection and ranging” device. Cultural developments have also evoked new words and phrases, such as *cyberspace* (originating from science fiction), *soccer mom* (from the world of politics), or *prequel* (from movies and pop culture).

The author states that a neologism takes hold in our vocabulary when it crisply encapsulates an activity, event or category that people intuitively understand but which has not yet been labeled.

The church is full of these activities that have yet to be labeled. So, the author decided to take a shot at naming and claiming some of these familiar phenomena. The following are just a few examples:

- *Bulletinitus*: The dazed, ear-ringing sensation you get when the announcements for the day drone on and on.
- *Falter Call*: A conclusion of a sermon or exhortation that falls flat, ending anticlimactically or ineffectively. For example, one might say, “It was a strong sermon, but it limped to the end with that *falter call*.”
- *Osteentatious*: Unrelentingly upbeat. An example, “Pastor Greg was a little too *osteentatious* for that occasion, don’t you think?”
- *Pewburn*: Posterial malady of those who hustle from church immediately after the service ends. For example, “The Gleasons were out of here so fast this morning they got *pewburn*.”¹

I found myself laughing hysterically in bed as I read this article the other evening. Interesting what things make us pastors laugh.... Finally, Marion looked over at me frustratingly and asked, “What is so funny?” As soon as she finished the question, I realized it had been a long time since I last had a really good laugh.

I don’t mean the casual chuckle in everyday small talk or the occasional giggle at a television sitcom. I mean the kind of laugh that comes from deep down in your loins, the kind of laugh that is so heavy, it requires the support of your diaphragm, the kind of laugh that emerges from the real joy of one’s soul.

¹ Clapp, Rodney. “There’s a Word for it.” *The Christian Century*. April 7, 2009. Pg. 53.

Honestly, there has not been much to laugh about recently. Verity Jones, the editor of *Disciples World* magazine, wrote in an article last month, “The news stinks. Every time we open a newspaper or go online, we find more bad news—soaring unemployment, a critically weak market, stalwart institutions in bankruptcy.” We continue to battle a global recession while at the same time we receive daily reports of ongoing wars, threats of pandemic, and stories about violence in our neighborhoods and streets.”

“One thing we don’t hear is that we are in a state of collective and massive grief. People are not just suffering individually, through loss of job, health care, retirement, or investments. We are also grieving the collapse of institutions and systems that have defined American life for more than a century.”

“Educational institutions like the Disciple’s own Lexington Theological Seminary are struggling to continue their work. Libraries and art museums are selling portions of their collections to keep their doors open. Large employers no longer provide stability to their communities. Even churches are shuttering the buildings and letting their paid staff go. On top of our personal hardships, we are witnessing a whole way of life coming to an end.”²

Yes, it’s been a long time since I had a really good laugh. Honestly, the article I was reading from *The Christian Century* wasn’t that funny. Nevertheless, the laugh triggered something in me. There had been something missing in my life recently; something I had been trying to find, but could not seem to put my finger on. After having that laugh and then reading our passage from John this week, I realized it wasn’t just laughter that was missing, it was something much deeper.

John writes, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” It was God’s joy that seemed to have gone missing. My joy has been incomplete.

It is not as surprising a concept as you might think—that God’s joy seems to go missing. It is part of our collective experience as human beings. We go seeking joy in every place except God. The Israelites did it. The Disciples did it. We continue to do it.

I am not going to lie this morning. In some of the places we seek this joy, we do find some happiness. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it rather strikingly. She says, “I do not have a million dollars, nor any plausible way of coming up with a million dollars, I seek happiness with smaller treasures instead: really nice clothes, for instance, a set of copperbottomed All Clad cookware, and—most recently—a Parker Duofold fountain pen with an 18 karat gold nib. Contrary to much of my religious education, these things really do make me happy. I enjoy wearing them, handling

² Jones, Verity. “Grieving the Passing of this Day.” *Disciples World*. April 2009. Pg. 1.

them, seeing and using them, but the truth is that they are all dismal failures at bringing me true joy.”

“When I wake up in the middle of the night and cannot go back to sleep for all of the fears that are taking turns sitting on my chest, it never occurs to me to get up and bring my 13" frying pan into bed with me. Like most everything else that brings me happiness, that is a daytime comfort, not a nighttime one. In the middle of the night, with the sound of my doomed heart banging in my ears, there is no getting around the fact that most of the things that I think bring me joy really cause me to feel incomplete. And I realize my only safe investment turns out to be whether or not I abide in God.”³

We seek joy in our flat screen televisions and our tile flooring. We seek joy in movies, video games, and sporting events. We seek joy in the market and in our retirement. We seek joy in our weekends and our vacations. We seek joy in music and the arts. These things do make us happy

However, these things also mask the fact that happiness is different than God’s joy. With happiness, we still feel incomplete, that something is missing. With happiness, one day, the market crashes, our home is lost, our retirement is gone, we can no longer afford to go to the movies or to the concert.....and suddenly we realize just how empty happiness can be. We realize just how incomplete we are without God’s joy.

So you may be asking at this point, “If God’s joy is different than happiness, what does it look like?” This concept of joy can be vague or broad, like God’s love, or God’s grace, or God’s mercy. How do we know if we have God’s joy?

Jesus tells us that complete joy comes from abiding in God. If we obey God’s command to abide in God’s love, no longer will we be God’s servants, but we will become God’s friends. Jesus is making a point about from where God’s joy does come. It does not come from products that can be bought or sold. It comes from those by-products of relationship, friendship, and connection.

There is a commercial on television right now for MasterCard. A woman wanders through a magical little shop and actually buys Priceless things. As she is putting these immeasurable things in her basket, a voice over says, "28 laughs, 9 hugs, 52 smiles, 2 contented sighs = \$0. A free day to take them all in: Priceless." I think this commercial gets at where Jesus is going with his explanation of God’s joy.

Jesus says in this reading from John that we can become God’s friends—friendship is a different kind of relationship than that of master to servant or even

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Treasure Hunt: Luke 12:13-21.” Review & Expositor 99 no 1 Wint 2002, p 97-104.

parent to child, which are both common images the Bible uses in describing how we are connected to God.

In true friendship there is mutuality, there is respect, there is accountability, and there is love—all things that cannot be labeled with a price tag. It is in our relationships—our friendship with God and with one another that joy grows, develops and is nurtured. It is in a hug, a smile, a laugh, or a tear that we share with those we love, that happiness is transcended and our joy becomes complete.

In just the last few months I have journeyed with my parents as they became victims to this waning economy in a number of ways. I have grieved with my wife over the death of Caroline and the loss of our future with a daughter. I have sought out the escape of happiness and the allure of an incomplete joy. Mostly, I did this by becoming a recluse in some ways, closing myself off emotionally to my friends and family, not allowing God to care for me through those who love me most.

And when it all came crashing down, I realized just how lonely happiness can be—just how joyless life is without relationships and connection.

If you want just a glimpse of what God's true joy is like, read again Psalm 98 that you heard this morning.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.

When was the last time you felt that kind of joy?

Our joy is incomplete without God and one another. Happiness will only carry us so far before the dark of night comes, those fears start turning in our chests, and our doomed hearts start banging in our ears. All the happiness in the world will not comfort us in those times. Our only safe investment for a complete joy is to abide in God.

Amen.