

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 15:9-17

May 21, 2006  
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9"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command. 15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.

What would it take to make you happy? What would you need in order for your joy to be full? More money? A better job? A child? A new house? Straight A's on your grade card? A cure for the disease you're battling? Bigger pension checks? More visits from your kids? Being on a winning soccer team? What would make your joy complete?

When I was younger, the answer to the question, "What would make you happy?" came easily into my mind. And the answer always had something to do with getting something I didn't have. What would make me happy? When I was in third grade, I thought a guinea pig would make me happy. And it did, for about six days. Then I had to clean its cage. Wood shavings soaked in guinea pig pee are so smelly that they made my eyes water. I found out that the guinea pig didn't make my joy complete. In fifth grade, I thought a brand new pair of Reebok sneakers—the most sought after brand of footwear at the time—would make me happy. And they did, for about four days, until they got dirty during recess. Then all I could think about was how they were ruined and I wanted a new pair without scuff marks. I found out that Reebok sneakers did not make my joy complete. When I entered high school, I thought good grades would make me happy. And they did, on grade card day. But the rest of the time I was miserable as I strived for those good grades, as I wept over Algebra assignments and struggled with chemical equations. Good grades did not make my joy complete. In seminary I thought having a boyfriend would make me happy. And he did—and still does—most of the time. But I didn't anticipate the struggles and hard work that are part of an intimate relationship. Having a boyfriend or a husband didn't and doesn't make my joy complete. Three weeks ago I thought that a vacation would make my joy complete—but it didn't. The days in the car were long, I got a cold, Nathan got a cold, I missed home and work and the dogs. Vacation did not make my joy complete.

Sometimes I ask myself—when will enough be enough? What more do I need to be happy? By all accounts, I've got a pretty idyllic life. And yet, I would not say that my joy is complete. Perhaps it's my stage in life. Maybe one's joy isn't supposed to be complete at my age. Maybe it would lead to laziness and complicity and so it's some evolutionary thing that younger adults are hard-wired to not feel fulfilled. But I admit that I don't want to keep feeling the way I do now—like there's something more out there and something missing in here—for however much longer I've got to live. And I don't really get the sense that it is an age thing. Many of us seem to be yearning and wanting and wishing for a sense of complete joy and yet it eludes us.

Except perhaps for those who are the youngest among us, those by whom we are led this morning. I watch our children and I envy what I perceive to be—in them—a sense of complete joy. When I watch Bryce Opey seeking out his Grandma and Grandpa for a hug after church—when he finally finds them and grabs onto them in a full-body embrace—I get the sense that his joy is complete. He’s not thinking about making it to a lunch reservation on time or who he needs to talk with next or what he needs to put into his backpack to take to the Sandbox Academy the next day. No, he is enveloped in the joy of the moment—it seems to me that his joy is complete. And I envy that in him. For him, the hug is enough. He’s not yet at the age when he’s wondering if Grandpa will give him a dollar. For Bryce, the hug is where it’s at.

And there in is the message of Jesus words from John’s gospel—that complete joy isn’t about where we live, what we’ve got, or getting what we want. Complete joy comes only from love. Jesus tells us—“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” And what is the command Jesus tells us to obey? The command is to love each other.

It seems so easy doesn’t it? After all, loving each other doesn’t take money or prestige or resources. And so this sense of complete joy is within our reach. All we have to do is love each other. But that can be the hardest thing of all.

Remember Paul’s words on love—love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy. Love does not boast; love is not proud. Love is not rude or self-seeking. Love is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Obviously, loving each other isn’t as easy as it sounds—especially as we grow older, and wiser, and perhaps more cynical.

I remember when I was like Bryce. I remember when seeing my grandparents’ big old gold Monte Carlo pull into our driveway was the epitome of complete joy for me. All I wanted was to be with them. They didn’t bring me gifts or take me on exotic trips. All they did was show up and love me and I just loved that. And now, as an adult, I wonder what happened to that part of me. I wonder what happened to my ability to love with sheer abandon and to accept love without caution. I guess that through the inevitable events in life—getting my feelings hurt, my hopes dashed, and having my love for others go unrequited, I’ve gotten a little cynical and even hard. And I hate that. I really do.

Just ask Margaret. Poor Margaret was on the receiving end of a very weepy phone call from me last week. We were staying with my in-laws near Boston—with whom my relationship is somewhat rocky. There are some old hurts and grudges that have not been fully resolved and so I’m always a little on edge and cautious when I’m with them. On the surface, all is well and polite and civil, but deep down all is not well and my joy is far from being complete when I am with them. And to be honest, I’m likely the guilty party. I have certain expectations of them as Corey’s parents, my in-laws and especially as Nathan’s grandparents that they don’t fulfill. Granted, these are my expectations of them and they’ve not done anything horrible or overtly hurtful, but I just can’t seem to let it go. And I hate that I’m that way with them. I wish that I could just accept who they are and go with it. I’m really good about that with other folks—just

accepting them for who they are and loving them. But for some reason, I'm not like that with my in-laws. I want them to be more. And when we were visiting them last week, I really wanted them to be more. I confess that I wanted them to offer to help us out a little more. I want them to accept me more as one of their own children instead of just Corey's wife. I want them to want to be with Nathan more. I just want more from them. And I was so heartbroken and hurt and feeling petty and spiteful that when I looked around at their wonderful house and my very spoiled sister-in-law's room with its two hundred disc DVD player and her jewelry boxes filled with things from Tiffany's, and their fancy cars—well, I just fell apart. In my heart, I just want to love them and be loved by them the way Paul talks about love. I want to be able to let all of my pettiness and past woundedness go. I want to be happy at their good fortune and just leave it at that instead of wondering why, when they bought Corey's twenty-one year old sister a BMW, they didn't instead just get her a Ford and use the extra cash to fly out here for Nathan's baptism. And I know it's none of my business. They have different priorities than I do—I'm not entitled to anything they have. And yet, that petty, yucky part of me finds it hard to do what Jesus says and just love them—just the way they are. Just like he loves them.

And strangely enough, I found it hard to love them when they did just what I'd been saying I wanted them to do—to help us out a little more. When I got home and plowed through the piles of mail that had collected, I was shocked when I opened a letter from them. It read something like this . . .

*Dear Corey and Robin,*

*. . . Mom and I just got our tax refund in the mail. We had plans for what to do with it, but when we heard about your accountant's mistake and that you owed \$5000 for last year's taxes—we decided to send this check on to you as a no interest loan so that you can pay your taxes in full. Pay us back as you're able, no rush . . .*

ARGH, how could they do this? How could they be so nice when all I wanted to do was find more reasons to be upset with them and complain about them? How dare they love us like this! How dare they do something that makes them loveable!

No, Jesus' command to love each other is anything but easy to swallow. But I know, deep down I know, that my joy—at least my joy in my marriage and family—will never be complete unless I love my in-laws just as they are—without attaching my expectations and desires to them. I won't ever be able to walk into their home with a sense of ease and warmth until I can love them unconditionally just like Jesus does. To love them with complete joy—to love as a child loves.

And so, I watch for Bryce to hug Larry and Barbara. I watch Markku and Austin and Tanner play together. I wait for Emily to hug me during our Greeting. I listen for Maggie and Kendall and Miranda to tell stories about school and their new puppy. I wait for Will to ask a searching question. I watch Corinne and Sophie watching out for Sam. I watch Sam watching out for Nathan. I watch Nathaniel bravely walk up here in front of a bunch of folks he doesn't know yet. I listen to Hunter patiently explain a StarWars character to me. I watch for Austin's bright smile on his way out of church. I watch our little children and I see complete joy. And I thank

God that they are all here and that they show us what full joy looks like. That they teach us how to love each other. And that they remind us of how we once loved and how we can and will one day love again. That they remind us of the day on which our joy will be complete, because Jesus first loved us so that we can love each other. And then, we'll finally get what we need to be happy—love—sheer, unadulterated, unabashed love and our joy will be complete.