

## THE JOY OF SERVICE

I Peter 4: 8-11

Kelly Boyte Brill

Avon Lake UCC

4 June 2017

Today is a festival day in all Christian churches. Today is Pentecost, known as the birthday of the church. Pentecost means fifty. Today marks 50 days after Easter. We don't know much about what happened in the seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost, but we can imagine, we can take some good guesses. It's quite possible that for 50 days, Jesus' disciples had been wandering around lost, and wondering what to do next. They were living in fear, knowing full well that if Jesus had been put to death, they might also. Despite the good news of the resurrection, they felt alone and abandoned. They were waiting for something to happen, as Jesus told them to do.

And on Pentecost Day, the fiftieth day after Easter, that SOMETHING happened, in a big way. A sound came, so loud and powerful the only way you can describe it is like a gale force wind. People began speaking in different languages - it was like a wildfire spreading throughout their community. "So this is what Jesus told us would happen," Peter said. "This is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God among us. Jesus is no longer with us in person; instead we have this Spirit, this enthusiasm, this passion, this joy." That day, according to the book of Acts, the disciples baptized 3,000 people. And let me read to you what happened next: "They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers...Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met...They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved."

That is the birthday of the church, this is the birthday of the church. A spirit comes into a group of people, not a managed subtle spirit, but a spirit as uncontrolled as wind and fire - those are the symbols for Pentecost - wind and fire. And the disciples, who once were wondering and wandering, are now on fire. They are filled with enthusiasm and passion. They now realize that Jesus' message was not lost on that Easter weekend but is theirs to tell and share and pass along and keep alive. Excitement like that is contagious. The church is born in a spirit of revelry and joy.

Somewhere along the way, church has lost its association with passion and excitement and enthusiasm. Church has become associated with solemnity and seriousness ONLY, with boredom, and dullness. There is a time for the quiet reflection which breeds wisdom, but there is also a time for exuberance. Ask people OUTSIDE the church what words they associate with Christianity, and I'll bet "enthusiasm" and "joy" are not two of the most popular answers. It's too bad. Because we were born in a spirit of joy. And we will only survive as a movement if we restore joy to our lives, and to our reputation, and if we recover our sense of balance, if we let people out there know that in here, we have fun, we laugh, we experience JOY.

By all accounts, Jesus is a person who found joy in life. He played with children, he attended parties, he inserted puns into his stories and parables.

Last Saturday, I visited the Cleveland Museum of Art and spent some time in the wing that contains the impressionists, my favorite part of the museum. Next door to the impressionists in a slightly more modern room you can find this painting, called "Head of Christ" by George Rouault. I like it, but it is rather sad, isn't it?

Some people in our church really love a painting called "The Smiling Christ" or this one called Risen Christ by the Sea.

Do you suppose it's time we try to reclaim the JOY portion of our heritage?

I learned this week that the Hasidic movement in Judaism started with a unique reading of the Creation story, and the belief that when God created the world the "sparks of God" fell into all things that exist in the world. These sparks are still scattered around the world, waiting for us to release them. Whenever we serve God, we are releasing those divine sparks out into the world again, and we experience joy. I love the fact that

the imagery used is a spark, a spark of light shining in the darkness, a spark of fire, like the fire of Pentecost, a spark of joy.

What is joy? One writer says it is this simple equation: happiness + gratitude = joy.

The combination of happiness — which can come from things, or from momentary, fleeting pleasures, plus the ability to stop in the moment and feel profound thankfulness.

Another writer says that joy is: “**An act of resistance against despair and all its forces**” Joy refuses to let despair have the last word. Oh, you can always find some reason — or many reasons - to be discouraged. But what good is our despair doing us? What good is it doing the world? The answer to the world’s problems is not silliness, or pretending that everything’s ok. For Jesus, the answer was passionate enthusiasm - loving the world so much that he refused to give in to evil and oppression.

Joy comes from being connected to each other and to that spirit of love which binds us together. And there is no quicker way to the experience of joy than service. When we serve one another, in love, in partnership, we find joy. Service connects us God’s heart in an almost instant, electric way.

I am so excited for those of you leaving on the mission trip next Sunday, especially those going on your FIRST mission trip. I know you will have fun and I pray that you will discover the joy of service. It doesn’t come from feeling sorry for the people you’re helping, it surely doesn’t come from feeling superior to the people you’re there to serve. It comes from recognizing our common humanity, and knowing that one day - in some capacity - YOU will be the one being served, AND from the humble knowledge that you ARE being served and taught through this experience.

I also pray that you will be so passionate and enthusiastic when you return that service will become part of your everyday life, and that you will draw others towards service, and towards the God who has made this life of joy possible for all of us.

Our scripture passage for today reminds us that we are each called to serve one another, each in our own unique ways. Some of our adults are serving by driving, some are on the food crew, some are responsible for the audio-visual support. Some youth members of the team have the gift of making others laugh, some are quiet, behind-the-

scenes workers, some have the gift of noticing those people who seem discouraged and cheering them up.

Our passage goes on to say, “Whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies”. It’s not about us, in other words. Service is NEVER about us. If we act like it is, there’s no joy in it. Service isn’t about patting ourselves on the back or padding our resumes. Service is about being a vessel for God’s love, a tool through which God’s love can work.

Let us leave here today thankful for the God who calls us all to joyful service, and equips us with everything we need. Whether we stay here or go to West Virginia, whether we’re young or old, rich or poor, we all are welcome at the table where God nourishes us for the life of joyful service.

Let us pray, using the words of today’s scripture: “God, may you be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To you belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”