

Act 10:44-48

John 15:9-17

1 John 5:1-6

“Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands;
lift up your voice, rejoice and sing.” AMEN!

Today we continue to walk our way
through the Easter season with the story
from the Acts of the Apostles as well as
John’s Gospel account.

Here again is a section from Jesus’ final discourse.

His words today follow last week’s reading
about Jesus being “the true vine” and
we are “the branches” to bear fruit.

The movement today makes the
notable expression of Jesus’ love and
his remarkable elevation to call
the disciples “friends.”

Before they were “servants” but now
something has changed.

They are friends and the new moniker strikes me.

Of course, we have watered down
both of those descriptive words.

We over-use the word “love”

and attach it to just about anything
that gives us pleasure.

We count colleagues we hardly know as friends.

We number them on Facebook.

I will be honest with you, there are
some Facebook friends that I'd think twice
about laying my life down for
according to some of their posts. :-)

But you see it, right?

It is not a hard stretch to understand
that our concept of love and friend just may
not be the same as Jesus'.

I'm pretty sure Jesus was talking about
love and friend in very different categories
than we have.

When it comes to love,
I feel like I've preached these lessons
to you already and that you know
the sense of love Jesus spoke about.

Sacrificial love, not just a feeling,
but love as an action word.

We, however, might not have talked too much
about what Jesus meant by the word friend.

There is not any language that describes
a true friend that is unfamiliar to us.

A friend is trusted, steadfast, and
connected to you in community.

A friend can also challenge you and me to grow.

For Jesus, a friend is one that will
lay down life for the other.

None of these are surprising to us but
what might be a shock
is to remember those who were
hearing Jesus' words directly.

Jesus' willing followers/students,
male and female, including Peter who
would deny him and Judas
who will hand him over to the authorities.

Jesus did not use the title "friend" loosely,
he lived it's meaning out by the way he lived
and how he died.

But, before he did that
he made sure we knew the same
was expected from us and
from all of His followers. (Pause)

So today there is love, friend, and then
another word that can be quickly passed over
but so important for us to recognize today.

That word is “joy.”

Jesus said, “I have said these things to you
so that my joy may be in you and
your joy may be complete.”

Jesus expressed “joy” to be twice blessed on
his friends, even upon
the denier and the betrayer.

And so, like last week, we find in this section
the troubling news about Jesus’ departure
but also an assurance from Jesus that
binds them together with joy

because a relationship of joy with Jesus
is never severed.

They were still going to be in the world,
just like we are still in the world,

but they (and we) can be joyful
in the presence of Christ. (Pause)

Doing what we do for the love of a friend.

Fellow believers, the more we grow,
the more we see how closely tied
joy is to suffering and pain.

“Edith Eva Eger told the story of visiting
two soldiers on the same day at
the William Beaumont Army Medical
Center at Ft. Bliss.

Both were paraplegics who had lost
the use of their legs in combat.

They had the same diagnosis and prognosis.

The first veteran, Tom, was laying on his bed
knotted in a fetal position,
railing against life and
decrying his fate.

The second, Chuck, was out of bed
in his wheelchair, explaining that he felt
as if he had been given
a second chance in life.

As Chuck wheeled through the garden,
he had realized that he was closer to
the flowers and could look right into
his children's eyes."

One soldier may have been having a good day
and the other a bad one, but the lesson is
not lost how we can find joy in
the midst of our own sufferings.

"Eger often quotes fellow
Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl, who
said that our perspective, literally has
the power to keep us alive or
to cause our death."

("The Book of Joy," authors Dalai Lama, Bishop Tutu with
Douglas Abrams.)

It is more than just a positive mental attitude,
it is one's willingness to be surprised by joy
in the midst of suffering and to account
for that suffering's purpose.

Jesus taught in the final discourse
to his disciples this very gift.

Keeping perspective and following
the command to love as Jesus loves us

will bring about suffering in life but in
that very action, there is no greater joy.

Jesus said so.

The way through is to love one another. (Pause)

Tony Hedra tells of a personal encounter with God
in the midst of despair in his book,

“Father Joe: The Man who Saved my Life.”

Tony wrote, “I was hurtling still farther in the depths,
both down there and above,
watching myself fall as one does
in a nightmare.

Falling, falling through myself, out of my soul,
which I was sure never existed anyway.

I fell incalculable distances below
the solid rocks of faith and truth,
into the deep and dead space where
there is no God, nor Christ, nor faith,
nor hope, nor salvation and
[it felt would] never be again.”

That was how painful Tony
described his crisis of faith.

He was trapped inside it and he was terrified.

So he sought out his old mentor
Father Joe, a Benedictine monk.

Father Joe knew what Tony was going through
and explained it this way:

You fell in love with God and then everything
was fantastic and joyful, but now
the romantic honeymoon part is over.

I am afraid it happens to all of us
who are serious about their walk with God.

In despair Tony replied,
“Then I will never have that feeling of light
and certainty again.”

Father Joe patiently answered,
“Someday you will experience a much greater
light and a clearer certainty than just
the feeling.

What has happened to you is a great gift
given on what you thought was a terrible night.”

Father Joe was merely saying in different words

the joy that Jesus blessed the disciples with
as they came to terms with His departure.

The disruption or even painful contraction
is a way God finds us and begins to make
all things new. (Pause)

This God, making all things new,
is written about in Acts.

“While Peter was still speaking,
the Holy Spirit fell upon all
who heard the word.”

Imagine what such an event might look like!

The astounding event of God’s Spirit falling on
those outside the circle.

Gifts poured out even on Gentiles!

That’s not a big deal for us because
we are gentiles but it was a

New God Creation event taking
place back then.

The Book of Acts tells the account of
the tremendous growth of the

budding Gospel church, spreading to
everyone outside the circle.

A place where insiders and outsiders
were gifted with the Holy Spirit.

A church of welcome and
inclusion and loving purpose...

So many voices praising God.

This account flows from God's promise
through Peter that God shows no partiality.

This new understanding tells us that God
does not favor the rich or the powerful,
but sides with the oppressed and
marginalized while calling us
to do the very same action of love.

As we take in this new revelation,
we must know the grace offered in
these texts is not cheap.

The inclusion God offers is to those who fear
and love God and does the things acceptable
to the teachings of Jesus.

In this there is no greater joy. (Pause)

Fear (in the Bible) means
respect/honor and love
from Jesus in the way of action.

In closing, I lead you to verse 13 of
chapter 15 in John:

“No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

This single verse more than perhaps any other
in all four gospels is the most explicit statement
about what it means to love
the same way Jesus loves.

In this... there is no greater joy.

AMEN!