

“Joy – Now?”

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Relax in and attend to Jesus, so that his love will produce your joy.

John 15:1-17

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Spurgeon’s Sorrows

My thoughts about today’s sermon began last Sunday afternoon when I started feeling down for no good reason. It lasted an hour or two, and I didn’t like it. Many pastors struggle with ministry later in the day on Sundays or on Mondays. That rarely happens to me. It did last Sunday.

The Lord was preparing me for this week. I’ve had multiple conversations and interactions with individuals whose emotional and/or mental health struggles are far deeper and last much longer than I have.

On Monday, I listened to a [TedX Talk](#) by Jason Failing, who has been a part of Corinth but has moved out of town. His talk is 20 minutes of honesty and vulnerability about what it’s like to live with schizoaffective bipolar disorder. Christians and churches have made the struggle worse by saying he’s demon-possessed, with condescension wrapped in Bible belt slogans. He says, “Maybe you’ve got it all figured out. You’re deep. I’m shallow. I writhe in anguish here in your shadows.”

There were others. Addiction struggles. Marriage and family issues. Meaning of life issues. Financial struggles. Some were seemingly caused by the pandemic; others aggravated by the isolation. I talked to two different mental health professionals who say the mental health crisis is affecting not only their clients, but the counselors.

Early in the week I picked up a book from my reading stack titled, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows*, by Zack Eswine. [Charles Haddon Spurgeon](#) was the first megachurch pastor, preaching for 38 years in London. Eswine tells of his lifelong battle with depression. At times it seemed to be situational. At age 22 he was preaching to several thousand

people and a prankster yelled, “Fire!” The resulting stampede killed 7 people and seriously injured 28 more. Two weeks later Spurgeon stood in the same pulpit and said, “I feel utterly unable to preach to you for your profit.”

It wasn’t just external circumstances that prompted Spurgeon’s sorrows. It was body chemistry, and he knew it. It was doubt about God and about his calling. It was the wear and tear of caring for others, of preaching, of public scrutiny, of family life, of a general ignorance of Christians and others about the complexities of human life. Spurgeon was misdiagnosed and misunderstood. Although he was gospel-saturated and Bible-focused, sometimes Spurgeon couldn’t shake his sadness, even suicidal thoughts.

Later in the week I read another book, *Blessed Are the Crazy*, by Sarah Griffith Lund, who will offer a workshop for area UCC churches April 2 about mental health challenges during the pandemic. Both Sarah’s father and her brother struggled with severe mental illness. Her cousin – abused brutally and horribly as a child – was executed for rape and murder with Sarah serving as clergy witness. Some of you may struggle with her more progressive views on social issues, but I found her story compelling and humbling. She closes with practical response steps for churches.

Complete joy

As I turned to this week’s Scripture text, I couldn’t help but focus on John 15:11 – “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” What exactly was I going to say about a teaching of Jesus designed to result in joy when my week was saturated with hard things?

The timing was a God-thing. The setting for Jesus’ teaching about the vine and branches was the night before the hardest of things. Judas has gone out to betray him. Peter is told he’ll deny Jesus. The night will bring an arrest and unjust trial, the morning will witness a scourging and crucifixion, and the afternoon will see darkness and burial.” Really, Jesus? Joy – now?

One of the most surprising statements Jesus makes in the Upper Room is in the next chapter: “It is good for you that I go away” (16:7). In his bodily form, Jesus could only be in one place at the time. When he returns to the Father, the Holy Spirit can be with any of them anywhere, anytime. Because he loves them, Jesus prepares them for his absence.

I’m not Jesus, but I’m trying to be intentional about preparing you for my retirement next year. One of the ways I’ll do so is by sharing the pulpit with my colleagues – sometimes for part of the sermon, sometimes the whole message. Today I’ve invited Kevin Watkins to share some of the sermon time. Together we’re going to look at three ways Jesus tells his disciples they can find joy – yes, even now.

Relax in me

Kevin: “Remain” occurs eleven times in seven verses. This is the equivalent of Jesus underlining, bolding, italicizing, highlighting, in all caps, with six exclamation points. To remain is supremely important to Jesus in his last moments with his disciples.

“Remain” (Greek: *meno*) has a number of rich meanings: to remain, abide, dwell, or make your home. Jesus says, “Make your home in me, as I make my home in you” (4). There are two places he makes his home: in his disciples and in the love of the Father. Jesus is always experiencing his Father’s love. That “home” is available to his disciples.

One other translation for this Greek word that has been enormously helpful to me is to understanding “abiding in Christ” as “relaxing in Christ.” Branches don’t consciously abide. Abiding is rather passive. To remain in Jesus is to relax in Jesus. To remain in Jesus’ love is to relax in his love.

Since chapter 1, John has been telling his readers that Jesus is the source of life and meaning in the universe. He created everything and everything has life because he wills it. The language in 15:4-6 says that the only way to experience life is to receive life from the source of life. The only way to have a life that overflows and creates more goodness and life is to remain in the vine, Jesus.

Twice he gives what seem like warnings (and maybe they are), but it is also reality, there is no fruit and no life apart from Jesus. Jesus says, “You can’t push me away, ignore me and my teachings, or hide from God and still live. Sin always involves hiding from God. There is one source-giver of life, then and now, and that is Jesus.

But for those who relax in Jesus, there will be joy. Joy is indispensable to life with God. Joy makes a terrible master/idol, but when we relax in Jesus, remember he is in the room with us, and call on his grace to do what he says – joy is very often present.

Bob: It’s incredibly freeing to remember that Jesus is holding you. But what about that part where he cuts off the branch not bearing fruit? That part is designed to contrast Judas (who was cut off) and Peter (who was pruned).

You can trust the one with the pruning shears. The sharp blades are safe if he’s holding them. Don’t worry about trying to fix everything – not the world, not the nation, not the church, not even you. You don’t have to initiate or look for sorrows or struggles. Life will provide enough without that. But when you experience them, relax in him. Jesus is holding you.

Attend to my words

Bob: Jesus offers a second strategy for joy in the moment, whatever the “moment” is. As Kevin said, when words and ideas are repeated in a passage that underscores their significance. In verse 3 he says, “You are already clean because of the

word I have spoken to you.” In verse 7 he adds, “If you remain in me and my *words* remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (emphasis added). The word “word” or “words” occurs 35 times in John, so this is not just random.

In his book, *Anatomy of the Soul*, Psychiatrist Curt Thompson asks, “How well am I paying attention to what I am paying attention to?” That’s what I hear Jesus implicitly asking in this vine passage. The theme of the vine metaphor is, “Relax, I’ve got you.” But if you’re not paying attention, you won’t hear those words.

Think about the words these eleven disciples are going to hear as the night progresses. The accusatory words of Caiaphas. The threatening words spoken to Peter. The puzzled words of Pilate. The angry words of the mob: “Crucify him!” The indifferent words of the soldiers: “Let’s cast lots to see who gets his clothes.”

Jesus is telling them in advance: “Pay attention to what words you’re paying attention to.” Others’ words may drain your joy. My words will be your source of joy.

In today’s world there are so many words competing for our attention. Some of them are mixed messages. Many words even the opposite of what Jesus taught us.

Kevin: Like Bob said, we live in a world of messages. We live in the most marketed to culture in the history of the world. Studies say we see 4,000 or more advertisements a day. 4,000 different messages competing for our attention.

To make matters more difficult, sometimes Jesus’ own words are confusing. Another set of words that is twice-repeated in this text: “Ask whatever you will, and it will be done for you” (7). “Whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you” (16).

What does this mean, especially since many times we pray and nothing happens? I don’t know for sure, but let’s start here. On the one hand, Jesus is not saying, “Asking God for something is a guarantee you’ll get it.” Experience and scripture shows us that. On the other hand, his words don’t mean nothing. He wants us to attend to his words. Some people say that “in his name” is the qualifier. Or, “If you abide in me,” it will change what we ask for.

I hear Jesus saying, “Your prayers matter. God is listening. Keep asking. Keep knocking. Keep seeking. And keep trusting.” In other words, this is the Jesus version of “Never, ever, ever give up.” The advertisement or self-help book would probably follow this up with “Keep trying. You can do it.” The Jesus’ version says, “Relax in me. Trust me. Stay in touch with me. I’ll make happen what needs to happen.” Those are the words he wants us to attend to.

Love somebody in my name

Bob: Here’s where I want to return to where I began: the theme of mental illness. I do not want to oversimplify a very complex subject. Mental health struggles

encompass a wide variety of causes and effects. What they have in common is an invisible thing called brain chemistry. When you're young, and especially if you're raised in certain Christian environments, you think there's no such thing, that every problem is a sin problem, and every solution is a faith solution.

The older I get and the more I interact with people, the more this reality hits: even our spiritual side is a function of brain chemistry. It's not only brain chemistry, but what's happening in our relationship to God and to others is happening inside the complex organ that sits behind our eyes. It's fascinating, and humans are only beginning to understand it.

The sadness I felt briefly last Sunday afternoon was largely a biochemical response – a drop in adrenaline, endorphins, dopamine, and so on. That hour or two created greater empathy for those whose brain chemistry is such that they live with that lack of feel-good hormones constantly, or intermittently.

We have not done well as a church, and the blame can be placed directly on my shoulders after thirty years as pastor, in what Sarah Lund calls “breaking the silence about mental illness” of all kinds, from depression to addiction to bipolar disorder to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that rewire the brain.

In John 15, Jesus prepares his disciples for a deep trial by saying, “This is my command. Love each other.” What he's saying is that life's tests, whether they come from without or within, require action. Yes, there's a passive “Relax in me,” but the only way to lift ourselves out of the sorrows of the moment is to take some positive step outside yourself – to move toward someone and not away from everyone.

When we realize how safe we are in him (“Relax in me”), the response is to pay it forward. There is someone in your circle who is directly or indirectly dealing with short- or long-term brain chemistry challenges who needs you to take a step in their direction.

There are many aspects of sadness that we can't control, including our body chemistry, the actions of those around us, and the circumstances we face. But there's always somebody to love. How can we find the inspiration, the motivation, to do that?

Kevin: Bob and I have discussed several times this week that there is more in the passage than we can preach in one service. In the midst of it all, we have verse 13: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

Functionally, Jesus laid down his life for Lazarus. When Jesus came back to Bethany to raise Lazarus, so soon after the religious leaders in Jerusalem tried to kill him, Jesus knew it would cost him his life. And it does. But Lazarus is not the only friend he will die for, also for His disciples and for those who believe because of His disciples which is us. If you are questioning how God feels about you, let Jesus' actions in the following stories in John answer your questions. He loves you.

Jesus also calls them friends. I think the same is true for us. We do not primarily work for Jesus or under Him, but with Jesus as friends and co-laborers. This is both weird and beautiful. But we join Jesus in His work to love the Father and to love people.

Finding joy

Bob: Yesterday, while finalizing my preparation for this sermon, an essay from the New York Times came across my email. Actually, a lot of articles and essays, but I had to choose only one to pay attention to. It's titled, "[What to Do with Spring's Wild Joy in a Burning World.](#)"

The idea is simple. When you're dealing with anything from brain chemistry to relationship struggles to global conflict, pay attention to spring. The article closes with these words: "Turn your face up to the sky. Listen. The world is shivering into possibility. The world is reminding us that this is what the world does best. New life. Rebirth. The greenness that rises out of ashes." As a Christian and pastor, I would say that's what *God* does best. God is making everything new for the umpteenth time.

Joy is God's idea. We find more of it when we relax in him, when we pay attention to Jesus' words, and when we find somebody to love. This is what Jesus means by "fruit that will last." Fruit is what the vine was made for. When the vine is producing fruit, it's happy – even if there was pruning along the way.

Kevin: I'll close with a few ideas of how to relax in Jesus.

Repeat. Maybe it's the Lord's Prayer. Maybe it's "The Lord is My Shepherd. I shall not want." My first year at Corinth I was nervous, wanting to impress. I wasn't good at my job. I set a geographic reminder on my phone so that every time I pulled into the parking lot, these words of James Bryan Smith would pop up on my phone: "I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights. I live in the strong and unshakable kingdom of God. The kingdom is not in danger and neither am I."

Release. Sit with God for 5 or 10 minutes. One morning each week sleep until you can't sleep anymore. Revisit Sabbath in your life. What weekly rhythms remind you that we do not run the world? There is a source of all meaning and life in the universe and it is not me. Play like you're a child. My children, ages 2, 4, and 6, are teaching me this. Choosing something fun says you know your Father has everything in his hands.

Invite. We can invite Jesus into our work, our commutes, our phone calls, our meals. We can ask his help to notice those who are isolated or in crisis or acting out in ways that don't reflect attachment to the vine. Ask for his help moment to moment to do the next loving thing. Amen.