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“There’s Joy in the Truth”

A sermon by JL Klinck and Emily Stark

6th Sunday of Easter / Youth Sunday

May 13, 2012

Acts 10:44–48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1–6; John 15:9–17

(Emily Stark) Good morning. I know a lot of you may be thinking, “Who is that girl up there?” I haven’t been going to First Presbyterian all my life like a lot of my friends up here, so that is to be expected. My name is Emily Stark, and I am a junior at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics. Yes, the nerd school. Yes, I am a nerd, one who loves analytical thinking and research. That being said, it is generally my first step when faced with a major task to ask questions and seek answers. Writing this sermon with JL was no exception. I was really interested in the story in Acts that we just read, and so I dug just a little deeper. A little back story: So Cornelius, he was not Jewish, yet he said that the Lord sent a vision to him of **man in shining clothes telling him that the Lord has heard his prayers and remembered his gifts to the poor.** The robed man also said for Cornelius “**to send for Simon who is called Peter,**” which he did (Acts 10:30–32). Peter was amazed by the fact that God sent this message to a non-Jew, and it made Peter realize that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation, teaching us what is right (Acts 10:34–36). So then we arrive at Cornelius’ house, and the Holy Spirit comes to all who heard the message, even the uncircumcised. Peter challenges the judgmental by asking, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?” (Acts 10:47) Since God has already accepted them, who are we not to?

(JL Klinck) We are not the ones to judge. God is the one who gets to decide on what is or isn’t unclean. We don’t really get a say in what’s unclean. The circumcised, for example, thought that it was wrong to baptize the Gentiles. They

didn't get to judge, just as we do not maintain the right to judge. We can, however, choose to obey or not obey God's commands to love. In John, we read that obeying God brings joy to our heart. So what exactly is Joy? For me, Joy is caused by scientific things in life, worldly things, like the buzzing of lips through a French horn, but the product of this simple physical motion creates in me a spiritual sensation, a feeling of Joy. So for me, joy, at its most basic root, is caused by a worldly act that creates an extraordinary sensation.

(Emily) For me, I didn't really *understand* Joy until this year. It is my first year living away from home, away from my support system, away from my family. From day one, I managed to have my faith challenged and questioned, which was frustrating at first. I prayed a lot about it, and I found that my prayers were being answered. I would sit in worship here at First Presbyterian, and I know it wasn't coincidence that Joe was preaching on the very issue I had been struggling with. I fell in love with First Presbyterian and everyone in it. I was still recovering from surgery and had physical therapy that my mom would come up for twice a week. I can't forget the smile she had on her face when I just gushed about what the sermon was on or how all of a sudden, some text made sense. It was my mom, my rock, who told me that feeling was Joy. It's different from happiness. Happiness is flat in comparison to Joy. Joy consumes you. Joy moves you and inspires you to do the work of God.

(JL) But we ourselves shouldn't be the only thing that is moved. I think God really wants us to share the joy and let it move, too. And what better way to spread the wealth of joy we feel than by being friends with someone. How many of you have ever been with a friend, and just hanging out with them has made things brighter for you, made you feel better about life? Friendship is about spreading the joy with other people. The ability to be friends with other people is really one of the most powerful things I know of in this life, and we can utilize it to spread God's love. And of course, friendship won't be just you making someone else feel happy, not all the time. Friendship is a two way street, and for a friendship, this two way communication is what really brings two or more people together. Jesus said, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you

everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). He establishes that the difference between friendship and servitude is this two-way communication. It’s friendship that brings us the joy that is promised by God.

(Emily) While that distinction between friends and servants and masters is important to realize, there is one key point to make. Although we have choices in life, very little is in our control. Who our friends are and to whom we show love isn’t necessarily our choice. God gave us the gift of the capacity to share Joy with others in the form of a love that is all inclusive. We cannot say that we are Christian because we have this love. It is not the distinction, but rather the product of Christianity and God-given Joy.

(JL) I love music. I’ve been taking lessons in piano for almost eleven years now, and I’ve played French horn for almost 4 years. There’s really something about music that moves me, and playing music really lets me express that movement. Whenever I play music with other people, people who are also moved to express and create, something unusual happens. In order to play in a band, you have to, at the bare minimum, play in time with the other musicians, and in order to do this, you have listen to them. If you want a better performance, you start to listen to everything they do and try to blend and match with them. We listen to each other for the melody, so we can balance properly to accommodate. All this listening, these two way connections, all this happens with everyone, so we are all listening to each other, and we almost become one being. It turns from something merely physical to something spiritual, as one body, one instrument, all the parts become one to create one glorious, emotional song.

(Emily) The camaraderie amongst musicians is easy to see; however, someone’s got to lead you, haven’t they? Going back to John 15—doesn’t it say that the group as a whole should be on an equal level? There is a clear two-way communication between you and the other musicians, but what about the conductor? Isn’t the conductor more of a master figure than a friend figure?

(JL) That’s a good point. Yes, the conductor leads us through the music, and the conductor can really keep us together and even gives us hints on to what to do in

terms of expression. The conductor adds energy to the group and is a leadership figure. But we as a band have to take that extra step in order to connect. It's kind of like reading the music itself. There are multiple instructions that let you know how to play, like the notes themselves, the time signature, or how many beats per measure there are, key signature (which determines which key to play in), and dynamics, or how loud or soft to play. But really, it's up to the player to interpret the music and turn it into something expressive, rather than just a bunch of notes on the page. In a band, it's the same. The conductor works as additional guidelines, but really the people in the band work together to make the music and become the single mind amongst several bodies. But I am reminded of all this when reading the Psalm lesson, which calls for us to "break forth into joyous song and sing praises... to the Lord with the lyre and the sound of melody" (Psalm 98:4–5). In a sense, this rejoicing through music is rewarded through this unity and unanimous energy, this spirituality that is created through this community of expression and rejoicing. It is a creation of something beautiful out of the chaos of the notes given. In the same sense, we can take the chaos of our lives and turn it into beautiful music, if we are so inspired to do so.

(Emily) And I just want to add to that, that at the end of the Psalm, it says, "**At the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity**" (Psalm 98:9). Now, it's important to put it into context because according to the psalmist, by "judge," it doesn't mean judge in a condemning sense, but rather ruling fairly and with equity.

Finally, we want to look at the 1 John passage. This part caused a lot of confusion for us both. In the first half, it says, "**If you say you love the father, you must also love the son as well**" (1 John 5:1). However, father and son are both in lowercase, so this isn't God and Jesus. Looking at other versions of the Bible, such as The Message, we found words like "one who conceives" and "child who was conceived" so this isn't necessarily a specific child. Actually, I argue that this isn't a child at all. Rather, "father" and "child" are metaphors. One Bible verse that I try to live my life by is James 2:14–17, or the "Faith without works is dead" passage. Faith would be the father and the deed, or work, is the child. One's faith should be the cause of the works, not the product. Furthermore, you cannot say that you love

the father or have the faith without loving the child or acting so. All these notions of joy and the Holy Spirit come together here. Your faith should move you, should excite you, should compel you, should consume you to the point where you cannot sit idly by. Your faith should stir something up within you that leads your mind to questions and your feet to work. Earlier we said that we were *chosen* to bear fruit. Well this is the fruit: action, change, excitement.

(JL) In the second half, Paul mentions that it will not be burdensome to carry out the commandments. I find this strange because in my experiences, it had been difficult to bring these commandments into the world. But John 15:12–13 reads “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Living *this* command is not as difficult as we perceive it to be, for this love can be expressed through the acts of our faith in anything from the most simple to the most dramatic, such as sharing your time and resources to help others and give back to the community that nurtures you. Even an everyday smile can brighten someone’s day. These acts of faith are what God commands and hopes for us, and if everyone participates, it won’t be difficult or a burden because it will become a standard of living.

(Emily) You know, he’s right, it does *say* it won’t be burdensome, but I have my doubts. It says in 1 John 5:4: “**For everyone born of God overcomes the world.**” I don’t know about you, but that frightens me. Overcomes the world? Sure, that could mean getting to Heaven, but I don’t think this world, which is a gift from God, is something to overcome by escaping it. In fact, I don’t think the world is something that we should *want* to escape. No, the world is not perfect, but that is where love comes in. What if overcoming isn’t exactly winning a battle against worldly enemies, but instead, accepting your enemies as friends to the point that there is no one left to fight? I think that sounds more like something Christians should live by: love and equality. And I have faith that I can do it. I have faith that all of us can do it, and that is a gift from God.