

Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE GIFT THAT CAN'T BE RECALLED"

St. John 16:16-33

Text: "So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you." St. John 16:22

The Gospel of St. Luke tells the story of the life of Jesus. When it comes to the resurrection it reports how the disciples could hardly believe what had happened. His crucifixion had devastated them and scattered them into the night, but his resurrection had been astounding to them. But after Jesus had been with them for a time St. Luke brings his story to a close as he writes, "While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven." Well, how would you have felt if you had been one of his disciples and for a second time he is taken away from you, but now he is gone forever? If the one you loved the most were suddenly snatched from your arms, how would you feel? If the one who was the dearest in all the world to you were suddenly gone forever, how would you react?

You see, that is why the ending of Luke's gospel is so unexpected. It catches us by surprise. We would expect weeping and tears and sorrow at this final parting. Instead, when Luke writes, "While he blessed them he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven," he then closes his gospel with a final sentence. He writes, "And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God." (Luke 24:51 and 52)

So here we are confronted with a gift from Jesus that could never be recalled--the gift of joy. In the days ahead the disciples would endure abuse, come under persecution, they would be ridiculed and humiliated, and some even put to death. Yet, in the midst of all that life brought them, they were to have joy. As the writer of the little book of James was to say in years to come, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials." (James 1:2)

So this morning I want to talk about Christian joy. Historically we Presbyterians have not been accused of being joyful Christians. We have been characterized as dour and woeful. I once heard of a man who had an uncanny ability to spot Presbyterians. At a large gathering he could point out a man and say, "You, Sir, are a Presbyterian." Or he would say, "You, Madam, over there--you are a Presbyterian." Everyone marveled at his ability and just couldn't understand his amazing skill. One day he was at a meeting and was demonstrating his skill. He pointed out several Presbyterians and finally he pointed to one man and said, "Sir, you are a Presbyterian." The man replied, "Actually I'm a Baptist. I've just been sick three weeks."

In our Scripture for this morning Jesus tells his disciples about his coming death and what sorrow it will create in their hearts. But then he goes on to tell them, "but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." Well, that is exactly what happened. They had joy that couldn't be recalled. It was because of this inner joy that St. Luke could write of the disciples, "and they returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

The first thing I want to call to our attention this morning is the source of the Christian's joy. Jesus said to his disciples in verse 22, "but I will see you again.." Isn't that always the promise of Jesus to those who believe in him? He says, "I will not leave you comfortless (or desolate); I will come to you."(St. John 14:18) That is the promise of Jesus. He comes to us. He lives in our hearts. He is a constant presence to those who love him. And because he keeps his promise, he is a constant source of joy in our hearts. Dr. S. D. Gordon tells the story of an old Christian woman whose age began to tell on her memory. At one time she had known a great deal of the Bible by heart, but with advancing years her memory failed more and more. Finally only one verse remained, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." As time kept marching relentlessly on, part of that last verse slipped away until all she would repeat were the words, "That which I have committed to Him." When the time came for her to cross over to the other side, her loved ones saw her lips moving. Leaning over they heard one word repeated over and over, "Him--Him." All but one word had been lost from her Bible, yet in that one word she had the whole Bible for she still had Him.

Do you have that inner joy this morning that nothing can take away? If you do, then you have "Him". The second thing I would bring to our attention about our test for this morning is the seat of the Christian's joy. Our text says, "but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice..." Yes, the place--the seat--of the Christian's joy is in the heart. You know, we like to think of ourselves as being intelligent, rational creatures. Yet, the truth is, we are ultimately ruled by our heart and not our heads. So what is important is what is in our hearts.

Hasn't the Bible always taught that? Over in the Old Testament when God talks about restoring a fallen Israel, do you remember what He said? He said through Ezekiel, the prophet, "A new heart I will give you..." (36:26) Jesus himself said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts." (St. Matthew 15:19) When St. Paul talked about who was a real Jew he said it was the one who was circumcised in the heart.(Romans 2:29)

What is your heart like this morning? What fills your heart? You see, it is what is in your heart that will control your life. I remember reading once of a preacher who telephoned his sermon title into the local paper. He told the girl taking the information that his sermon was entitled, "The Lord is My Shepherd." "Is there anything else?" she asked. "That's enough," he replied. The next day the paper carried this sermon titled: "The Lord is My Shepherd--That's Enough." Well, that is a sermon by itself! If the Lord is in my heart--if he is the Shepherd of my inner being, that is indeed enough.

The October Reader's Digest came to our house this week. I haven't had a chance to read it yet, but I scanned through it and saw an article that relates our health to emotions and attitudes. The more emotionally secure one is in his or her heart, the less illness and disease one is subject to. Jesus in the heart brings peace and serenity. All of this simply confirms a recent study at John Hopkins which reveals church people have less sickness and a lower death rate than the general population.

Some years ago when I was doing some post graduate work in San Francisco I was fascinated by the Golden Gate bridge and I discovered some interesting information about it. During the construction of the first half of the bridge, 23 men lost their lives through falls. At considerable expense, a safety net was placed under the construction work for the second half of the bridge. Ten men who actually fell were saved by that net. However, the most interesting thing they discovered was that the work went ahead almost 25 per cent faster when the fear of falling was removed. Well, that's what Jesus in the heart does for us. Over in Nehemiah 8:10 we read, "The joy of the Lord is our strength." He takes away our fear and we are able to live more efficient and effective lives. The joy of the Lord in my heart sets me free.

So, the source of our joy as Christians is Jesus and the seat of our joy is the human heart. Now notice the rest of our text for this morning in verse 22. There we read, "but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. This introduces us to the security of our joy. This is the gift the disciples had, a joy that could never be recalled, for no one could take their joy from them.

What gives you joy this morning? Are they secure? Suppose you love to travel and see the the world as many of you do. The day is going to come when you are too old to travel. Suppose you love good music and as you grow older you begin to lose your hearing; or suppose you enjoy art and watching plays and your eye sight fails; or maybe using your hands to create things worth while brings you pleasure until arthritis comes and you are incapacitated; or you love philosophical speculation and thinking the great thoughts of philosophers until time takes away your mind. Would having a lot of money give you joy? But money is subject to taxes or inflation or loss and then where is your joy? Do you take your joy in your family? Well, certainly our loved ones should give us joy, but if we are totally dependent on our family for our joy, that joy is destroyed when the children leave home, or a loved one dies, or a relationship is broken. So if our joy is in people or in things, eventually those things will fail us. Do you remember the story of the rich fool that Jesus told? His joy was in what he had. He tore down his old barns and built new, larger ones and then he told his soul to take its ease. As he put it, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But his joy was short-lived for God said to him, "Fool! this night your soul is required of you and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:19f)

Some poet has written:

Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving;
 My warrent is the Word of God, nought else is worth believing.
 Though all my heart should feel condemned for want of some sweet token,
 There is one greater than my heart whose word cannot be broken
 I'll trust in God's unchanging Word till soul and body sever
 For though all things shall pass away His Word shall stand forever.

Well, that is a wonderful insight into Christian joy. God's Word says that if our joy is in Jesus, absolutely nothing in this world can take away that joy--"for though all things shall pass away His Word shall stand forever."
 Yes, our joy is secure.

I don't know what gives you joy this morning, but one thing I do know. The only joy you will ever have that can never be recalled is the joy of Jesus in your heart. All the things of this world may fail you, but Jesus will never fail you.

There is a lot of unhappiness in our world today. It isn't because we don't have more than most people. Billy Graham tells the story of one of America's richest men who asked for an audience. Here was a man who had everything the world had to offer, but when he sat down with Dr. Graham he began to weep and cried out, "I am the most miserable man in the world." I suspect there are many of us here this morning who have some misery in our lives. We have much, but somehow it hasn't met our deepest needs. I also suspect there are many here this morning who are truly unhappy. It may be because you haven't progressed in your profession as you had hoped, or because you have not made the money you wanted, or it may be because something has gone wrong in the life of a loved one, or even a marriage that is strained to the breaking point.

What would bring you happiness? What would put permanent joy in your life--joy that could never be recalled? There is only one person who can give you true joy, for Jesus is the source of our joy. We need him in our hearts for that is the seat of our joy--the heart. And when we have that, our joy is secure for no one can take that joy from us.

And do you know, when we have the joy of God, a wonderful thing begins to happen. We find that it heals a lot of other problems in our lives. It takes away a lot of other needs we have. You see, our problem is not really outside of us--our real problem is in the heart. And when we have the joy of Jesus, that problem goes away.