



"That Your Joy May Be Complete"

Scripture – John 15:9-17

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, May 9, 2021

"Mother's Day has always cast a shadow of sadness for me," writes Margaret Renkl in an opinion piece that ran in the *New York Times* on Monday.¹ "My paternal grandmother died before I was born, when Dad was only 24," she continues. "[Dad] always threw himself into making Mother's Day brunch a special event for [my] Mom ... but he never stopped mourning his own mother, the one for whom I am named."

Though realities differ from person to person, family to family, Margaret Renkl's words resonate widely. For so many of us, the day we have set apart to celebrate mothers brings as much sorrow as joy, as much angst as gratitude. For some, like Margaret Renkl's father, Mother's Day elicits fresh waves of grief for those who mourn a mother now gone. For others, the grief is born of different losses — the loss of a child, the absence of a spouse. This day is heart-wrenching for those who know the pain of longing ... whether longing for a mother's love, or longing to offer such love to a child. This day is fraught for women who do not feel called to motherhood but have often felt criticized — even vilified — for that choice. Yes, for so many, Mother's Day casts a shadow of sadness. And the shadow is especially long after a year defined by loss, as countless sons and daughters, parents and friends face this — the *first* Mother's Day — without someone they love.

It's a holiday that brings into relief a tension that is woven throughout life — the tension between sorrow and joy. On the one hand, this day is full of celebration. You find it in the messages of gratitude scribbled on notecards or attached to the art projects that come home from school. It's evident in the lush bouquets of flowers that, today, adorn kitchens and dining rooms where love blooms. For some families the joy will be palpable as they gather together, possibly for the first time in months. There will be laughter and love and hugs that last a little longer than usual — each one a small attempt at making up for lost time. There will be plates passed and stories shared. And, yet, in many of these dining rooms, the delight will mingle with sorrow as eyes fall upon the empty chair at the table, as painful memories show up like uninvited guests.

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This same tension — the tension between sorrow and joy — also underlies today's reading from the Gospel of John. Every year, during the season of Easter, the lectionary sets before us passages from "The Farewell Discourse," the name given to the speech Jesus offers on the night of his betrayal and arrest. His words come

¹ Margaret Renkl, "Mother's Day Can Be Painful. It Can Also Reconnect Us to the World," *New York Times*, May 3, 2021 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/opinion/mothers-day-loss-nature.html?smid=em-share>)

just after Jesus kneels to wash the disciples' feet, just before he kneels to pray in the garden. Given its placement in the lectionary, we read these words with eyes that have beheld the empty tomb, that have seen the grave clothes cast aside. But Jesus utters them in a room thick with dread, to disciples whose hearts are heavy with grief. Jesus is preparing his followers for a future without him. So — like a sage grandmother, making the most of her last lucid moments — Jesus is passing on the wisdom and comfort his loved ones long to hear. *I will not leave you orphaned*, he says. *Abide in my love*, he says. Jesus assures his disciples they will have what they need to carry out his ministry. But I doubt his words lift the pall of sadness completely. Instead, promise mingles with pain as Jesus bids his friends "farewell."

Yet — into this room that is thick with dread, to hearts that are heavy with grief — Jesus speaks a word of hope: *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* In the midst of sorrow, Jesus promises joy. Joy that is abundant. Joy that is absolute. Joy that is born of love ... That last part is key. The joy Jesus promises grows out of love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, Jesus says. And if you abide in my love, you will know joy. Of course, the commandment to love as Christ loves is not easy. The kind of love he describes in this passage is *not* a passive feeling; it's *not* something you fall into. It's something that requires commitment and vulnerability and sacrifice. Jesus is describing an active, abiding love — the kind that lifts others up, the kind that binds families and communities together, the kind that transforms the world. To love as Christ loves means laying down your life in service to others, metaphorically if not literally. It means sharing your life freely for the well-being of neighbor and community. No, the commandment to love is *not* easy. But abiding in love leads to a life of joy. *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*, Jesus says.

Now, in one sense, we know that Jesus is speaking of *imminent* joy — joy that is expected, but not yet realized. Much like the elation of which the Psalmist speaks: *Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!* (Ps. 30:5b). As Jesus continues "The Farewell Discourse," he will liken this joy to the exuberance that welcomes new life:

You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy, Jesus says. *When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world* (Jn 16:20-21).

The church knows this kind of joy, because we are experiencing it now. Just as Jesus said, our pain has turned into joy. We have made the journey from the cross to the empty tomb; we have witnessed an act of self-giving love that brings new life to birth. And during this Eastertide, we exult that God has taken off our sackcloth and clothed us in joy. Yes, we are living in the Resurrection affirmation that "joy comes with the morning!" But, Christ's assurance is *not* limited to a joy foreseen. The joy he offers is not reserved for the moments *after* we have endured pain, *after* we have suffered heartache, *after* we have overcome anguish. No, the joy of Christ finds its way into rooms where sorrow lingers, where sadness pools in the corners. It wells up *in the midst of* grief, even in the tear-drenched darkness of night.

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In a moving episode of the BBC series *Call the Midwife*, a nurse named Jenny discovers such joy first hand.² This series is based upon the memoirs of the real Jennifer Worth, who spent three years as a nurse and midwife in

² *Call the Midwife*, Series 3, Episode 8 (2014).

London's East End. During her time in London, Jenny suffers the unexpected loss of her love, Alec, who dies suddenly after a fall. The shock sends Jenny into a tailspin, and she begins to question her vocation. And, then, the mother of a dear friend and colleague falls ill. Or, rather, Lady Brown begins to succumb to the cancer that has been silently spreading for some time. Upon seeing Lady Brown's suffering, Nurse Jenny begins to wonder if her own experience of loss might serve her well at the beside, where loving hands provide care and comfort as they usher the dying into the life beyond. So Jenny approaches her supervisor about the sense of call stirring within her:

"You're trained to bring life into the world, not to help it to depart," her supervisor counters. "Surely, they're equally important," Jenny responds. "I've lost count of the number of babies I've delivered; this would be something new for me. It's something I feel very inspired by."

And, so — after attending a particularly long labor, which leaves her weary and in need of reinforcements — Jenny leaves a house brimming with the anticipation of birth and makes her way to a home where death is imminent. She has come to care for Lady Brown in her final moments, and to care for her colleague in her grief. It is there that Jenny finds joy. For her, it is not in a room where anguish gives way to elation, as a new mother holds her long-awaited babe. Rather, it is in a room where the pall of sadness hangs heavy, as a mother and daughter bid farewell. Joy is in a room where love abides as a community of care ushers the dying into the life beyond.

Yes, the joy of Christ finds its way into rooms where sorrow lingers, where sadness pools in the corners. It wells up *in the midst of grief*, even in the tear-drenched darkness of night.

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This, too, is the promise of resurrection ... that joy is not only *imminent*, but *at hand* —present in the midst of pain. It wells up, often in unlikely places at unexpected times — an enduring gift from the one who came that we might have life and have it abundantly. *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* Just as Jesus said, it seems joy wells up whenever, wherever love abides. It bubbles up in the moments of sacred storytelling, just after a loved one passes. It echoes in the comforting words of a child who, though confused by Mommy's tears, gives voice to an eternal truth: "It will be OK." It permeates through the touch of a comforting hand, the presence of a companion through the valley. Joy wells up whenever, wherever communities care for one another with love that lifts up, love that binds together, love that transforms. Margaret Renkl gives voice to this truth in her essay in the *Times*:

[As painful as Mother's Day can be,] it is also a day for contemplating the ways in which we're connected to one another, through times of joy and times of sorrow, across time and across species.

... This week I will write notes to a friend who lost her only child to the pandemic, and to two others who lost their mothers. This holiday will be terrible for them all ... My only hope is to remind them that I am holding them close across the miles.

... [And on Mother's Day] I will cut a bouquet of antique roses and think of my mother and my grandmothers, the one I knew deep into my 40s and the one I never met. I will think of my great-grandmother, the steadfast center of my childhood, and of the mother and grandmothers who

formed her sweet spirit, and of the mothers and grandmothers who formed them, too, going back longer than I will ever know.³

Yes, Margaret Renkl sees it — the joy that bubbles up, even in the midst of sorrow. It's there in the embrace of friends who help carry the weight of grief. It's there in the cherished memories of dear ones who have shaped and shared our lives. It's there in gratitude that wells up and fills a room, as surely as the scent of fresh cut roses. Yes, joy is there wherever love abides.

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This promise is for us, today and always, whether we have come through a night of weeping or are now fighting off the tears and terrors of another day. Whether you are surrounded by love or mired in loss, this promise is for you. Wherever your heart finds you today — sick with sorrow or singing with delight, frayed by angst or bursting with gratitude — know this, trust this: Wherever love abides, joy follows. And the joy of Christ is abundant, absolute, complete. May this joy dwell in your hearts and lift your spirits. And, like the sweet scent of fresh-cut roses, may this joy infuse and transform your life.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, on this day, when we celebrate mothers, we give thanks for the way that you are like our mothers who nurtured us and gave themselves in countless ways for our well-being.

You love us and seek the best for us;
you forgive us when we fail to extend kindness and respect;
and you challenge us to become a more Christ-like person.

Loving God, we rejoice with those who have given birth to, or adopted a child this year, and we weep with those who have lost a child.

We pray for those who are expecting a child that they may be healthy and receive emotional, physical, and spiritual support.

We pray for those unable to have a child, that they may bear the distress of unfulfilled dreams and discover other opportunities to form bonds with children.

We pray for those who have been cut off from their children that they may have an empathetic friend who will carry part of the burden.

We pray for those who were abused by their mother, that they may discover loving relationships that help to erase the scars inflicted by a disturbed soul.

We pray for those who must be both mother and father to their children.

Eternal God, we give thanks:

for stepmothers, who successfully navigate the challenging terrain they must traverse;

for aunts and grandmothers who generously bestow love and guidance;

for surrogate mothers who provide a blessing for couples;

for foster mothers who provide nurture, guidance, and support for children who need a capable and loving parent;

and we give thanks for the mothers of scripture and for the lessons they teach us.

³ Renkl, "Mother's Day Can Be Painful. It Can Also Reconnect Us to the World."

God of love, we rejoice with all mothers who enjoy beautiful bonds with their children; may they know in their souls that they are successfully fulfilling one of the most important jobs in the world by nurturing, guiding, disciplining, and encouraging the next generation.

And may those of us who were raised by wonderful mothers express our gratitude for a blessing that continues to grace us throughout our lives. Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.