Spiritual Joy

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and your joy might be complete.”

Last week we took a look at what becoming a disciple, and bearing much fruit might look like. Let’s explore Jesus’ desire, expressed in our Gospel today that his joy be in us, and our joy might be complete. I believe reflecting on spiritual joy can nourish us, while challenging us in a healthy life-giving way as well. It’s timely too: these days, causes of joy abound – Graduations, Baptisms, First Communions, Mother’s Day celebrations; putting in a garden, getting out on the course, enjoying the Spring …. add your own favorites. Look deeper, and spiritual joy can be found in each.

Yet even putting a simple list like that together opens up the fact that so often, there are two sides to everything: Graduations can be a cause of joy, but bitter sweet. Along with accomplishing a goal, Graduation also means saying goodbye to the familiar, to friends who may be going in different directions, to a chapter of life. Mother’s day can be a great cause of joy, but it can also be a reminder of painful loss. Even something as simple as enjoying the spring isn’t necessarily pure joy. The pollen count is sky-high. A nice walk can lead to sneezing, itchy eyes, a sinus headache. Much more seriously, consider some of the dreadful stories that fill the news – violence, terrorism, natural disasters. How do we avoid being pulled down? Where and how do we get to the joy Jesus promises?

Let me start by identifying some different aspects of joy, and how they play out. There can be an emotional aspect of joy. Watch the children from our school during recess, on the playground – you can see the emotional side of joy. Smiles and laughter, squeals of joy. I can hear it in the rectory without even going outside.

Some joys are more of an intellectual kind, filling the mind. After struggling to understand, we suddenly see how complex things all fit together. We solve a problem. Or grasp an elusive insight. A joy, a sense of satisfaction.

Joy can have a physical dimension. Holding a new baby, a caress after a long absence – joy can be something we almost feel in our bones.

The joy Jesus promises, spiritual joy, can at times touch our emotional life. It can have an intellectual aspect, as when the scriptures open up as we pray them. At times, the joy Jesus speaks of can be so profound that is physical, we feel it in our bones. But ultimately, I believe spiritual joy goes deeper, is more than those features, though they may all be in the picture.

What image to use? I imagine a sailboat. At times, the wind fills the sails, and the boat clips through the water with amazing speed. It’s exhilarating. I’ve also been in a sailboat when there wasn’t a lick of wind. Sit and wait. We sat in the same spot an hour or two, then motored back to shore. A different story all together. Yet regardless of which direction the wind is blowing, how strong, or even if not at all, in each case, the water is holding up the boat, keeping it afloat.

External circumstances in our life are like the wind. They can be every from smooth sailing, to the boredom of sitting and waiting, to a tempest, a real storm. But when we are aware of God’s
incredible mercy, God’s infinite love, buoying us up, sustaining us, holding us, we have access to spiritual joy.

Now it is possible to go out sailing or boating and to stay totally dry. But what fun is that? Let your hand down into the water. Watch the boat cutting through the waves. Feel the spray on your face. The ocean of God’s grace, God’s abiding care, is all around us. Whether in a squall, dead calm, smooth sailing – God’s love is there for us, sustaining us. Let the spray hit our face, and we begin to taste spiritual joy. Grow more familiar with the ways of that ocean of love, immerse ourselves in it, and the joy of Jesus can fill us, our joy can be complete. It can lighten our heart, even when our heart is heavy. An intellectual joy can be found in the wonder of how God does sustain us in good times and in bad. Not often, but at times we can become so aware we are being buoyed by the Lord that we sense God’s abiding love in our bones.

How do we get to the joy Jesus offers? He spent time in prayer, speaking with his Father, pouring out his heart, entrusting his future to the Father, resting in that divine love --- that works for us as well. He cared deeply for the poor, those who were ill, those carrying a burden of guilt – if prayer plants a seed of joy, compassion, responding to the needs of others, reaching out, waters it. Listening to the scriptures, praying with the community, sharing the Eucharist – these are like the warmth of the sun that makes things grow.

Actually, all the sacraments hold a key to spiritual joy. What is more joyful than a baptism – thanking God for the gift of a child, and entrusting that son or daughter’s life to God’s providence? Watch our boys and girls making their 1st communion, and see the joy of coming to the table. Being anointed with Chrism. Confession, being bathed in Christ’s mercy. Exchanging vows, and finding in one’s spouse a most precious gift from God. Even anointing of the sick – the joy in knowing God is with me even when I feel most alone.

With Mother’s Day, let me wrap up with an experience most mother’s know only too well. You put your heart and soul into putting together a fantastic meal for your family. You know it will be delicious. You can’t wait to see the delight on everyone’s face, the joy. But the kid says – ‘I don’t like that.’ ‘But you haven’t even tried it.’ ‘I don’t want to.’ ‘Come on, just give a little taste.’ ‘No, I want a bologna sandwich.’

Actually this is almost too close to home. Mom used to claim that I lived on cheerios and bologna sandwiches for a couple of years. But you know what? With time, I discovered the joy of trying different things, even if I have no idea what it will taste like.

God created this incredible planet for us to cherish and enjoy. God has given us the sacred gift of life. At this very altar, God invites us to the banquet of life. Don’t say “No, walking with the Lord every day doesn’t sound so appealing. I would rather stick with what I know.” True, being a disciple may not deliver an emotional high in every circumstance. At times it is like walking in darkness. But when you are in the darkness and can trust that you are not alone – joy can describe that sense of security and reassurance. There are many things that can offer temporary, short lived joy. But only walking with the Lord can offer life long, spiritual joy.
Sometimes it is a quiet reassurance. There are times it is a shout of joy. It can be a sense of being wrapped in love. It plays out differently based on our personalities. On circumstances. But choose to walk with the Lord. Start the day with a prayer: Lord, there is nothing ahead today that you and I can’t handle together. End the day looking for the blessings you noticed. Pray to see the ones you missed. Gratitude opens the door to spiritual joy. Resting in the Lord’s love, quietly soaking it in takes us across the threshold. That I believe is the joy Jesus had in mind in our Gospel today.

A verse from John Greenleaf Whittier, set to music by Charles Ives hauntingly stays with me.

(sung)  
_O Sabbath rest of Galilee, O calm of hills above, where Jesus knelt to share with Thee,  
the silence of eternity, interpreted by love.  
Drop Thy still dews of quietness, til all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace._