

Complete Joy

John 15:9-11 ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

1 John 5:1-3 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome,

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Recently, it seems like every week the scripture lessons have been about love. Perhaps some of you are ready to move on to some other topic. You want to whip out your guitars, sing John Lennon's "All you need is love" and say "Alright already! We get it!" I understand, but the lectionary has handed us two more passages about love. Besides, even though many of us may really like John Lennon's song, most of us realize that while it's a lovely sentiment, it's also a huge oversimplification. We know that you can't live on love – but we also know that life without love isn't really living.

Maybe you heard youth at church camps singing, "They will know we are Christians by our love . . . yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." And that song, too, might strike us as idealistic and simplistic, a song that fails to know about the ugliness and grittiness of life out in the real world. And we would be wrong. Peter Scholtes wrote that hymn in 1966. He was a white priest in a parish on Chicago's south side. The neighborhood was half Irish and half African-American. Martin Luther King, Jr. was making his first trip to Chicago. Peter hung a big sign on the outside of the church welcoming King and he invited him in for a cup of coffee. "They will know we are Christians by our love," but sometimes that love can be costly. Peter Scholtes knew that first hand. He watched as white members left the congregation and then left the neighborhood.

We most often speak of love as a feeling that we have. I love snowy days. I love good music. I fell in love with him or her after only a month. But real love, true love, is outward focused. It's devoted to the other person. And loving is a virtue than can only be perfected over a lifetime.

Today's passage from First John says, "People who trust that Jesus was anointed by God are children of God, and everyone who loves God loves God's children. We show our love for God's children when we love God and obey his commandments." First John interweaves faith, love, and obedience. Trust, love, and action are so tightly woven together that they can't be separated. Loving God is exhibited by loving those created in God's image. There's a passage in Mark's Gospel where an expert in Jewish scripture asked Jesus, "What commandment is the preeminent one, the pinnacle of all the law? Jesus responded by quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, saying, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scholar of the law confirmed that he agreed with Jesus and added, "This is much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus saw that the man answered with wisdom, and responded by saying to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:28-34) When Jesus declared that the scribe was close to the kingdom of God, Jesus was not telling the man, "you're

going to die soon, and you're going to heaven." No, he's complimenting the scribe and telling him, "You understand the essence of living kingdom life --right here, right now."

In our gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." We can hear this as meaning, "If you do what I tell you to do, then I'll love you." But that isn't what it means. We think of commandments as law, as lack of freedom, as confining and burdensome. So, it's really confusing when Jesus goes on to say, "I'm telling you this so that you will have complete joy." How can that be? There's no joy in being loaded down with rules and regulations!

Let's think of another basic, fundamental law, a law of nature, the law of gravity. "The force of gravity locks the world in place – and frees us to walk, [dance!] to run, even to fly."¹ The law of gravity makes life work in predictable ways. You walk across a room and you can control where you go, when you stop, and when you change direction. If something slips out of your hand, you know where it's headed. It'll be on the floor! Consider things like eating and washing your hands. These actions are far less messy with gravity. Sometime, let your imagination wander and explore just how great it is that we have the law of gravity. It's a wonderful law. Of course, if we ignore the law of gravity, if we disobey the law of gravity, chances are that life will be unpleasant and painful.

Jesus taught and lived the law of love. Love God. Love your neighbor. This is the most basic law of faith. The law of love is fundamental. It is how life works. This isn't an optional law that we can adopt or reject. Like gravity, the law of love is always in effect. We ignore the law of love when we are envious, when we're angry, when we ignore others, when we're spiteful, judgmental, greedy, proud, vengeful -- and on and on the list goes. When we ignore the law of love, life becomes dreary, lonely, complicated, and hurtful. When we disobey the law of love, life is certain to be lonely, painful, and dangerous.

We turn our backs on the law of love when we think we can only establish our worth by comparing ourselves to others. Sometimes it's through having more – more money, more house, bigger car, or more status. Sometimes we try to find worth by taking pride in other differences. Any sentence that begins with, "At least I'm not . . ." is very likely to be headed toward an unloving place. At least I'm not old, not black, not stupid, not a Yankee, don't live in Alabama, not Hispanic, not a Democrat, not a Republican . . . well, you get the idea. When our worth depends on thinking that we're better than someone, the law of love is being ignored and the consequences will not be pretty, or compassionate, or filled with contentment.

And so it is that the law of love is sort of like the law of gravity. It exists whether we are aware of it or not. It can't be repealed. It's a fundamental way in which our world and our life is governed. If we ignore it we suffer. If we violate it, life is painful. But, if we obey it and live in harmony with it, life is stable, makes more sense, life is smoother, there's more gladness, and satisfaction. Or, as Jesus put it, if we abide in love, our joy is complete. Amen.

¹ David J. Schlafer, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008) p 493