

Sermon Text for February 14, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

I Chronicles 16:27, Philippians 2:1-4 *“Make my joy complete”*

On February 9, 2013 we gathered in this sanctuary together and we heard a sermon on I Corinthians 13 which is called the love chapter. After the sermon I invited any married couple who wanted to renew their vows to come forward and do just that. I was shocked with the over a dozen couples who came forward, it was hard to find a place for all of them. I remember John Faltin in tears as he renewed his vows with Cheryl, many of us were in tears in that day. One youth after the service said that it was the most impactful church service he had ever been to. Today we find ourselves on Valentine’s Day, really a secular holiday since it doesn’t find itself on our religious calendar and it has been absorbed and swallowed up completely by culture so that its religious roots are pretty much lost.

But there is something deeper about love that we experience together as a community and that we experience together as a husband and wife than what we find reflected out in culture. It isn’t happiness and it isn’t pleasure, both of which are often played off as love. Today, Paul describes joy as a fundamental part of what needs to be a part of the fabric of our lives. And like love, joy is not a superficial feeling or emotion, it is a foundational piece to the foundation of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. Today we are again surprised by joy as Paul states in our reading: “Make my joy complete.”

He then lays out a simple formula for what is meant to have complete joy in Jesus Christ which is being of one mind as a community, or as we will also see today, as a couple. But how do we live our lives with one mind as a couple, or as a church? Paul gives us three very basic fundamental approaches to life that will go a long way in providing that necessary unity: Do not be selfish, humble regard others as better than yourself, and look to the interests of others over your own interests. Let’s see if we can put some meat on these bones.

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In our very short Scripture this morning from I Chronicles we read that a fundamental part of God’s make up, who God is in essence, contains strength and joy. You cannot define who God is without using this word joy that we have been focusing so much on over these past few weeks. Joy is in its place – and that place resides in the living God and creator who not only made heaven and earth, but made each one of us as well. And don’t you think that a God who

has joy as a basic defining feature and characteristic would also include joy within our own fabric of being? I'm convinced that he would. A defining component to being a Christian, if you say that you are a Christian, then joy needs to be a fundamental part of your makeup, of who you are.

It might be helpful at this time to give a bit of a definition to joy. A definition that we haven't really given up to now. It is not the superficial presence of happiness. It isn't the superficial pursuit, and periodic achievement or pleasure. That is not joy. C.S. Lewis defined joy as being very different from happiness and pleasure and stated that joy resides in us continually and reminds us of our purpose and has an ability to inspire us even in the most incongruous of times. That last part was mine, but it makes sense to Paul and also to C.S. Lewis. Joy is able to reveal itself even in the times for Paul when he was in prison, even in the times for the Philippians when they are being persecuted, even in the times for us here in the midst of a pandemic that turns everything upside down and makes people that we once knew act in ways we never thought was possible.

Part of God's fabric is joy and so it ought to be a part of our fabric. God's nature of strength and joy as we see in I Chronicles reveals itself to us, especially in the form of joy. Paul tells the Philippians, he actually commands them, to make his joy complete. Because what is currently missing, according to Paul between him and the Philippians and we don't know why this is, we see reveal itself in vs. 27 of the previous chapter. He tells them that he knows that their agenda at the end of the day is to: "Stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel." This unity he alludes to again in vs.2 of our reading where he says Make my joy complete, and this is how you do it: twice he says: be of the same mind, be of one mind.

What a message for today. Beloved, body of Christ, bride of Christ, be of one mind, be of the same mind and that mind works together exclusively for the faith of the Gospel. That has to be our only agenda. The faith of the Gospel has to be the purpose for every elder, every deacon and every trustee and every member, and every person who steps foot into this church. Now Paul is speaking clearly to the church here, but we can also on this Valentine's Day turn it and speak to couples about this same concept and apply it to marriage. When we speak about a bride and a groom a husband and wife it is not a long shot to hear us speaking about Jesus, the groom, the husband, and the church, the bride, the wife. Scripture uses those words many times.

We are called in our marriages to be of one mind. We are called in our church to be of one mind. We have an example of that one mindedness in the earliest Christian church. Look at Acts 2:43-47. This was singlemindedness. This is the example we can point to. Look at Acts 4:32-35, the same goes here as well. This unity we find reflected in Scripture in the earlier of Christian communities produces what Paul calls complete joy. So unity produces joy. But unity, how does that come about, how is that produced. We may all believe that unity produces joy but we do not have the path to unity laid out before us. Oh yes we do, Paul does that for us as well.

This is true not only for the church but for your marriage as well. Complete joy in marriage is found in singleness of mind. How do we arrive at singleness of mind? We could turn to Romans 12:10 for a simple answer: Love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Okay that is helpful, but even more helpful are verses 3 and 4 where Paul lays out for us how to find unity in a marriage and how to find unity in a church.

We begin with vs.3 – do not be selfish. Selfishness in a marriage reveals itself when our interests and our desires outweigh those of our spouse and we create scenarios and opportunities that would only reveal themselves for our advantage. Selfishness includes hiding the full truth from our spouse because if the full truth were known then our selfish interests would not be realized. The same can also be seen in the church. If we are not all on the same page and we aren't genuinely trying to work together for the sake of what Paul states in vs.27 the faith of the Gospel, then each person will have their own agenda on what is important and the ways in which to arrive at that agenda. So in order for there to be unity in a marriage and in the church, you cannot be selfish.

Also in vs.3 we find the second leg on this stool which will support unity in marriage and the church. Humbly consider others as better than yourself. Culture already creates a false dichotomy between roles of husbands and wives, men and women, so often there is a sense in a marriage that one or the other is not as capable as the other for a variety of reasons. It could be gender, because they are a woman we think they can't do or understand certain things. It could be because of education that we think we might be better equipped to handle things because of our education. It could be employment because of what I do no one understands me and so I am uniquely qualified or they are uniquely disqualified from making those decisions. Whenever we think that we are better than others, have even been blessed with more holy spirit insight than others because of my spirituality, then we can run into a problem with unity.

The last leg on the stool for unity in marriage and unity in the church is that you consider the interests of others ahead of your own. This is a big one. This is a really big one in both marriages and in the church. In any conversation with your husband or wife consider what their interests are and put them ahead of your own. What does your wife want that you say you can't have because your interests outweigh hers, or what does your husband want that you say can never happen because your interests, your desires, your wishes outweigh that of your husbands? In the church, how are we putting the interests of others ahead of our own interests. Boy this is significant at this time. What decision have we made that have selfishly focused on us just wanting to be together, or for the sake of the safety of the congregation as whole? Putting the interests of others, of our spouse, ahead of our own interests is a path that rarely a marriage survives without doing.

We have a formula that we have just laid out. These three ways in which to approach life which is founded upon the example and command of our savior will inevitably lead to unity. This unity will then lead to a joy that is complete which is the very fabric of our God. Our task is to make our joy complete, together. Joy can only be complete in Christ Jesus. These tasks are not arranged in order to make us try harder. Our goal is not to try harder to be like Jesus. Then we set up a whole false legalistic framework that somehow we think will justify us because of what we do. Our goal is to love more because of the joy that is a part of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we love more then naturally and without even trying we will not be selfish, we will naturally humbly consider other people better than us, and we will look at the interests of others before our own are realized. This isn't something you have to work at. It something that has to come as a response for the joy of Jesus in your heart.

Amen.