

The Fruit of the Spirit is Joy
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
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John 15:1-11
1 Peter 3:3-16

John 15

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

1 Peter 1

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in

heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. ¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

¹³Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

I. Introduction

Now that Easter is over and we are in the season before Pentecost, I will share with you a translation suggestion that I'd never seen before, never thought of before, but has been bothering

me for a couple of weeks now. It has to do with Paul's listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, and involves the suggestion that the translation should emphasize that the (singular) fruit of the Spirit is love, and all of the other things that follow love are the manifestations of love in the life of the believer: "The singular 'fruit' may also indicate that the first item in the list ('love,' *agapē*) is the (one) fruit of the Spirit, with the other items to be construed as specifications or aspects of love: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, [which is accompanied or marked by] joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control'" (de Boer, NTL 362). When I asked some ancient Greek specialists if the argument made sense, they universally disagreed with the commentator, and usually that is enough for me to close the book and go running down some other rabbit hole.

In this case, though, that did not happen, and in an attempt to satisfy my own curiosity and to do a deeper dive into this problem, I've decided to spend the season between Easter and Pentecost exploring the fruit of the Spirit. At this moment, I have no idea how many weeks this will be: one week per fruit? A couple of fruits at once? So I have no idea how long this sermon series is going to last. But we'll find that out soon enough. So let's start the series by looking as broadly as we can about the concept of joy in the Bible, beginning with our passage from John's gospel and moving to First Peter.

IIA. Pivot to John

(slide2) John 15 belongs to the larger unit John 13-17, often called Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. Somewhat amazingly, other than the narrative of Jesus predicting his betrayal by Judas Iscariot in John 13:21-30 (see Matt 26:21-25 || Mark 14:18-19 || Luke 22:21-23), none of the material in these chapters finds any parallel in the other three gospels. It is also peculiar that

even though Jesus says, "Rise, let us be on our way" in John 14:31, we are not told that "he went out with his disciples" until John 18:1, and thus John chapters 15-17 seem to interrupt the flow of the narrative. Some commentators think that these chapters were spoken to the disciples while they were on their way (e.g., Haenchen *Hermeneia* 2:128 ["Chapters 15–17, accordingly, must be discourses of Jesus spoken along the way, as they cross to Kidron"]; BKBC 3:130-31 ["But it also makes sense to take the text as it is: Jesus does leave the room at 14:31 and the words spoken in 15–17 take place en route to the Kidron Valley"]), while others think that two separate traditions have been melded into one discourse (e.g., Beasley-Murray WBC 223-24 ["It would appear, then, that chaps. 13–14 form a self-contained portrayal of the events in the Upper Room and Jesus' Farewell Discourse, and that chaps. 15–17 give a further representation of the Lord's instruction on that occasion. The question arises how it came about that two Farewell Discourses are set side by side in the Gospel instead of being integrated as one discourse"]; Brown AB 2:656 ["The last line of 31 was the ending of the original Last Discourse. We have suggested that the final editor did not want to tamper with this ending and so, despite the fact that he was creating an awkward sequence, added additional forms of the Last Discourse after 31"]).

(slide3) Fortunately, these questions, as interesting as they are to me, do not affect the mention of "joy" in verses 9-11: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." As followers of Jesus, one of our highest priorities is to be *joyful* - not in the secular sense of always being happy emotionally but in the theological sense of recognizing and believing that we are loved by God, redeemed by God, and saved by God. In that sense, the joy that we experience as followers of Jesus has its roots in the God who saved us and who gives the gift of his Holy Spirit to his followers, and in this way Jesus follows in close alignment with one of the main traditions of the Hebrew Bible. One commentator puts it this way: "But in reality it is the Lord God in whom the Israelites rejoice.

It is God who brings salvation, vindication (Pss 68 and 149) and prosperity (Pss 68; 85; 106:4f; 126; and 132) to His people" (RISBE 2:1142). For example, Psalm 68 begins with the prayer, "Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him" in verse 1 [= MT verse 2] and continues in verse 3 [= MT verse 4] with the call, "But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy." It is clear from the flow of thought that the righteous are called to be joyful *because* God is scattering his enemies and *because* those who hate God are fleeing before him. That's a typical situation in which the community of faith rejoices because of what God has done for them. And that pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament: Whenever God's chosen people are in distress and need to be saved from their enemies, they pray to God in advance and prepare to rejoice when their prayers are answered. That is evident in the prayer of Psalm 85, where the people pray, "Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation" (verses 4-7 [= MT 5-8]). Why are the children of Israel praying that God will "restore us again"? Obviously they are in some kind of distress, though the psalm does not specify what kind of distress they are in (so DeClaissse-Walford et al NICOT 655 ["The issue in the psalm is the breach that needs to be healed, not the exact event that caused the breach. This is a prayer for anytime the people are in need of restoration"]; still, Weiser OTL 572 thinks that it reflects "It is more natural to understand the psalm in the light of the tradition of the festival cult celebrated at the autumn feast (v. 12), when the cult community continually witnessed at first hand (see Intr. 31, 43) the Heilsgeschichte as the representation of the gracious acts of God's guidance (deliverance from Egypt, bestowal of the promised land). If the psalm is understood in this sense, we may assume that it was composed in pre-exilic times"; Gerstenberger FOTL 131 thinks it refers to "the worship of the early Jewish congregations in the sixth or fifth centuries BCE as the original setting," a view to which Zenger and Hossfeld Hermeneia 2:364 concur ["The emphatic reference of the psalm to exilic or early postexilic texts favors a dating of the psalm in the (early) postexilic period"]; Tate WBC 2:368 argues that "If we assume a later period, for example that of Ezra and Nehemiah, the 'turning of the

fortunes of Jacob' in the return of exiles becomes plausible," a view to which Kraus CC 2:174 concurs ["Both psalms {85 and 126} are to be dated as post-exilic"]), and because God has saved, or rescued, or delivered them in the past, they are confident that God will do so again. And we do the same thing during our prayer time here. We lift up our prayer requests to God because we've prayed to God in the past and God has answered our prayers. That's why we can be confident that God hears our prayers and will answer them in the future, and why we give thanks and rejoice when God answers our prayers.

(slide4) But while the words of Jesus are rooted in this tradition, they are different because Jesus attaches a condition to the joy he wants the disciples to experience: the disciples are instructed to "abide in my love" in verse 9, and they accomplish this according to verse 10 by keeping Jesus' commandments (τὰς ἐντολάς μου; cf also John 14:15, 21, 23-24; note that "commandments" is plural and compare in verse 12, "this is my commandment [ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ ἐμὴ], that you love one another as I have loved you"; whether there is any significance of the change in number from plural to singular is disputed; see, e.g., Newman and Barclay, UBS Handbook 485 ["there is no distinction between the singular "command" and the plural "commands," and the reference is to the command to love"; Brown AB 2:638 ["It will be noted that here and in vs. 21 below Jesus speaks of his commandments in the plural, in contrast with the 'new commandment' (singular) of 13:34. The same variation of plural and singular is found in speaking of Jesus' commandment(s) in 15:10 and 12. His commandments are not simply moral precepts: they involve a whole way of life in loving union with him"])). As if to underscore this, he uses himself as the analogy for the disciples to follow: "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." So the joy that Jesus promises his disciples is not some kind of free gift that comes with no strings attached; the joy that Jesus promises his disciples is contingent upon their obedience to and alignment with his commandments. Once that condition is met, we will get the full benefit of Jesus' promised joy according to verse 11: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." And of course, that raises the question, what are the commandments that we are supposed to keep?

Jesus answers that question in verse 12: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This same thought is repeated in John 13:34-35, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" and is different from the call in the other gospels to "love your neighbor" and to "love your enemies," neither of which is present in the gospel of John, and no, I have zero idea as to why that would be the case 😞.

(slide5) In other words, joy as the fruit of the Spirit is not some happy-go-lucky feeling of happiness or positive emotionality for the followers of Jesus. Joy as the fruit of the Spirit is the combination of *our belief* in the surety of our salvation as a reflection of God's love for us and *our obedience* to Jesus' call to love one another, a call that complements the commandments to love our neighbors and our enemies. Not the one or the other only. We have to have both, if we take Jesus at his word. Thus, joy for the Christian is not primarily the product of our surroundings, our environments, or what is happening to us. To be sure, that is still a reality: if you win a \$10 million lottery, you will probably feel joy. I was joyous and extremely proud when Tyler graduated from Cal State Chico and the Marine Officer Training. And when I retire from teaching high school math at Bethel in 5 years, 6 weeks, and 27 school days - not that I'm counting down the days or anything like that - when I retire from Bethel, I'll be so joyous and so happy I'll probably throw myself a retirement party 😊. So that kind of secular joy exists, is good, and should not therefore be ignored. But for the obedient follower of Jesus, that takes second place to the knowledge of our redemption and our decision to obey Jesus' commands.

IIB. Pivot to 1 Peter

(slide6) Perhaps that is why the New Testament is so adamant that the obedient followers of Jesus can still rejoice when the circumstances they are in are not entirely positive. That we read about in 1 Peter 1, even though it appears over and over again in Scripture. Verses 3-5 tell us the situation we are in spiritually: that we have been given a new birth through the resurrection of Jesus (verse 3) and that because of our new birth, we have received "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" in verse 4. It is because of that reality that Peter can say in verses 6-7, "***In this you rejoice***, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." The "in this" refers back to the reality Peter has already described in verses 3-5: our current salvation and our future inheritance that comes as the consequence of our salvation (note that the introductory phrase ἐν ᾧ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε is morphologically ambiguous since the verbal form ἀγαλλιᾶσθε could also be translated as an imperative ["Rejoice in this!"; see the NLT "So be truly glad"] rather than an indicative, as the NRSV does; see, similarly, the NET, NIV, NASB, NAB, and NJB translations). And to underscore this new reality, Peter continues in verses 8-9 and says, "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." The believers that Peter is addressing aren't some rich, happily married people with 2 homes, 3 cars, 4 servants, and 5 kids. These are believers who are "suffering various trials" according to verse 6, who are suffering for doing the right and good things, just like Jesus did according to chapter 3 verses 13-17, and Peter calls their suffering "a fiery ordeal" in chapter 4 verses 12-19. Even granting that some of this language is rhetorical hyperbole, it

must be obvious that Peter's audience was not living in some blessed utopia. But despite the difficult situation that the believers were in, Peter instructs his audience to "rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13).

(**slide7**) It is this conviction, that joy is both possible and demanded in the midst of personal suffering, that represents the biggest change from the Old Testament's understanding of joy to the New Testament. One commentator puts it like this: "it is this joy while suffering that most clearly distinguishes NT joy from that in the OT. ... there is joy in suffering because suffering produces character ... and steadfastness" (**RISBE 2:1141; see also ABD 2:1023**). James explicitly connects suffering through our earthly trials with joy when he writes, "whenever you face trials of any kind, ***consider it nothing but joy***, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). And even though Paul doesn't use the language of rejoicing, he does align very closely with James when he reminds the Roman Christians to "boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:3-5). And both James and Paul are in agreement with what Peter writes in 1 Peter chapter 1.

III. Pivot to Today

(**slide8**) So the lesson for us about joy this morning is a simple one. It is common these days to think that joy is our emotional response to any good and happy thing that happens to us. And while there is indeed some truth to that, it is not what the New Testament teaches about joy.

For faithful and obedient Christians, there is a deeper and more important aspect of joy that is rooted not in our circumstances but in our reality and in our choices. We are to be joyful because we are saved, and because we are saved, we are to act like faithful and obedient believers and to uphold Jesus' commands to love God, love our neighbors, love our enemies, and to love one another. Because of this reality, no matter what circumstances we are in, our status as saved and obedient Christians is not undermined or negated by our circumstances, even when our circumstances are bad. I've asked for prayers for my student Aiyannah who was severely injured in a car crash last week. If we were Aiyannah, would we be able to be joyful while we are recovering from our surgeries? Over the last few weeks, I've read rumors that Valero will be shutting down its Benicia plant by April 2026, a decision that will be difficult for the city if in fact it comes to pass. Some have posted publicly that they are afraid that Valero's closing will impact Benicia the way Mare Island's closing in the mid 1990's affected - and continues to affect - Vallejo. Assuming that these rumors are true, will we still be able to be joyful after that closing begins to take effect in Benicia? There are stories every day it seems about US citizens being deported to Venezuela or El Salvador without going through any due process, and now two federal judges have apparently been arrested and charged with felonies for choosing to support the due process rights of individuals living in America. If we were the deportees or the judges, or if we were the family members of the deportees or the judges, would we still be able to be joyous?

That's the challenge for us if we take Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter seriously. So as we live our faithful and obedient lives this week, let's remember, every day, to take a moment and to practice being joyful. Even when it's hard. Even when we're suffering. Even when we hate

what we are going through. (slide9) And a reminder for us, I'd like to close this morning's sermon by asking everyone to repeat Paul's words from Philippians 4 that are on the screen behind me:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your mind in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:3, 6-7).

Hallelujah. And amen.