

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: John 15:9-17

Title: “A Place to Call Home: Residing in Love”

My heart ached when I heard the news last week. One of the kids for whom I was a pastor for nearly 8 years took his own life. He was 20 years old, graduated in the top 5 of his class at Bay City Central and was studying at U of M. When I connected with his Mom and asked her about Alex, she informed me that he suffered from depression and anxiety. Apparently, he'd had enough. Couldn't handle it anymore. And even though he was raised in the church, went on youth group mission trips, was active—even then—it didn't save him. My heart aches for him, his parents and his younger brother.

At our weekly meeting, I shared my concern for this family and asked the prayer team to add Alex, his parents, brother CJ and their family to our list, and followed it up by saying how disconcerting it is to hear of another person taking his life. Bud Stevens, a member of the prayer team, responded by saying “We have lost our joy.” I called Bud and asked him if I could share his remark this morning in order to honor the confidentiality of the group. He gave me permission to share it, but it's not the first time I've heard him say something like this.

When we hear of such things, I expect Bud is right: “We do lose our joy.” I certainly did when I heard of Alex's death. There is nothing joyful about such news. But we all know that life can be difficult. Even though we live in the kind of prosperity much of the world can only dream about, still there is trauma. People still suffer and are lost and find it difficult to navigate life sometimes. As a new board member of Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center I was reminded the other day at our monthly meeting that roughly 1 in 4 people struggle with some kind of mental illness. So if there are 100 people in this room, 25 of us would be so affected. The rest would certainly know someone with a mental illness. Life is not always smooth, fulfilling and void of potholes, even for the most successful among us. So how do we find meaning ourselves and share it with others? What does God have to tell us when we have lost our joy?

In John's Gospel, Jesus is telling his disciples farewell. From chapters 13 through 17 Jesus prepares his disciples for his own death. Scholars call it the “Farewell Discourse”. But before we get to the passage we read together from that discourse, Jesus has already washed the feet of his disciples as an example of what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. It's not about placing oneself ahead or above those around you. It's about serving, and here's what it

looks like. He then told them:

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And then just in case they didn't hear him the first time, after waxing eloquent about Jesus as the vine and you are the branches, Jesus tells them again in the passage we've read this morning:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

I read the thoughts of one scholar reflecting on this passage. She wrote:

As I have loved you: radical love of enemies, the poor, tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, lepers; the relentless challenges to the righteous and pious, truth telling, table overturning, and finally cross bearing and death embracing, laying down his life for his friends.

It makes me want to hide under my desk.

<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/easter6b.html>

“As I have loved you”: in case we want to sentimentalize what this kind of loving means, we are reminded that Jesus is in the midst of saying good bye to his friends. It's going to get dark and painful. His so-called friends will abandon him. One will stand firm in his denials that he even knows him. One will outright lead Jesus' opponents to him in the sedate garden of prayer where they could arrest him. “As I have loved you” is no easy, warm fuzzy feeling, but this is a divine love of choice, a love that overcomes the inner pain caused by the behaviors of others—even--or maybe especially--close friends. This is no easy, natural attraction. This love is something else. It transcends the pain of division and hurt and anger. And Jesus is the One who offers such love, even in the midst of pain, even when facing the darkness that life sometimes brings. Jesus is the One through whom the love of God flows, the One who CAN love enemy and call us to do the same—though saying so is far easier than doing so; the One who embraces people when they are at their worst: prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners; the One who sees value in those that others—even the most religious—dismiss: those who are poor, lepers, those who offend our sensibilities. Jesus' love is a radical love that challenges the best of us. In the face of all that is ahead of him, his primary commandment to these friends is “love one another as I have loved you.”

I confess when pondering this passage that I wrestled with Jesus' words when he speaks about joy: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may

be complete.” I wrestled with joy, maybe because of the news I heard last week about Alex. Where is the joy for his parents, his family, devout Christians though they are? Or maybe I identified with one preacher who posted on Facebook:

“Nepal, Baltimore, school shootings, cancer, suicide, poverty, discrimination, apathy, violence, ignorance, spite, abuse, injustice. Some days it's just too much for my little heart.”

But then again, Jesus speaks of joy in the Gospel According to John as he’s saying good bye. He speaks of joy, himself, in the face of his own death. In the context of this joy-speaking, he tells them “I am the vine and you are the branches”, to remind them of the source of life and love: it’s not them but God. “I am in my Father and you in me and I in you”, he tells them to remind them that they are not only connected to--as Paul wrote the Ephesians, “...one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:6), but that this one God and Father of all loves them, chooses them, wants joy for them. “Love one another as I have loved you”, he tells them because they need each other, to remind each other that God’s love is true and real and relevant and life-giving even and especially when it seems that joy is elusive because life can be dark and challenging and painful sometimes.

In all of this, maybe the crux of the matter lies in that word “abide”. Abide isn’t a word we toss around in every day conversation anymore. We do, however, hear the word “reside” occasionally, which is closely related to “abide”. To reside is “to have a home,” “to be present in or belong,” or “to be vested or placed in somebody or something.” Eugene Peterson gets to this meaning in The Message as you read a few moments ago:

If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love.
That’s what I’ve done – kept my Father’s commands and made myself at home in his love.

I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love.

“Make yourselves at home in my love.” Reside in Christ’s love. Be present to Christ’s love. He’s not speaking to individuals here. He’s speaking to the group. “You” is plural, not singular. So it’s not an individual thing here. It’s about residing together in Christ’s love because we need each other. Jesus made it clear that we need each other, that residing in Christ’s love is not an individual sport. It’s about community.

A retired colleague, Jack Harnish, passed along thoughts written by Anne Lamott about the church as community. Lamott is a writer who is one of the most vulnerable persons I’ve read. She wrote:

You know how sometimes you go to church or temple or mosque, or to those little meetings for people like you, who perhaps have tiny control issues, or used to drink until you ended up face down, or married; and

you sit there desperately hoping someone will say the exact right thing, to help break the toxic trance you're in, and help you find your way back home?

Well, what would that exact thing be?

...what do I want to hear at a gathering, like church, say, or a random group of alkie, [as in alcoholics]?

I want to hear, "Me, too. I have that, too. I know what that feels like." Gandhi and Jesus knew what it feels like, the loneliness, the sadness. The brutality. Jesus often said, "It's very hard here. Have you eaten? Look-- you all stick together, go to the beach and have some fish. Share what you have. We'll talk later."

I want to hear, "Wow, thank you for trusting me with that. What a ... drag. I've been through that, too. Let's file a brief with the Complaints department. Come, we'll sit down with a nice cup of tea and plan our strategy."

...

I want someone to say that against all odds, there is a solution. There really absolutely is. And that it's not out there--it's not in circumstance. Circumstances do not need to change to feel peace again or even happiness. It's not in amassing or achieving. I so hate this. As Lily Tomlin said, the problem with winning at the rat race is that you're still a rat. The solution is in knowing the truth. The solution is always spiritual, and it almost never has anything to do with the problem.

I want to hear someone remind me that if I want to have loving feelings, I need to do loving things. I want someone to make me laugh about our shared humanity and cuckyness [sic]; I want someone to remind me that laughter is carbonated holiness. I want someone to make me promise them that I'll get outside; that as someone else has probably said, praise is an attitude; I can--in advance--thank you-know-who, ... aka Howard, as in Our Father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name. I want someone to remind me of what Ram Dass said, that we're all just walking each other home. I want to hear that big fat cherries are on sale for \$4.99 at most stores; and that peach season has officially begun.

I just want to hear that I'm loved and chosen and welcome, no matter what a mess I've made of things, or how defective I still feel sometimes. I just want to hear that it will get better, although maybe not tomorrow right after lunch. I want to hear that you and God will never leave me alone. That I'm not nuts for finding life a totally mixed grille, unlike the

nice bumper stickers--that it can be hard, magical,/ brutal, gorgeous,/ unfair, hilarious, sweet, wild and mysterious, all at once. Or that if I am nuts, you're nuts too; and we are so lucky to be together in this jar; and so delicious.

That is what I need to hear today, and that is what I am going to say today, in spite of it all. So there; and thank you thank you thank you.

Jesus told his disciples to love one another and to reside in God's love because dark days were ahead. They would need God and each other. They would need to be at home in divine love together because everything around them would be topsy-turvy, as life sometimes is. They would need to stick together because they didn't always get it right and having a community to which to belong allowed them to keep each other in check. I don't know about your home, but I know in ours I am not always right and I am not always wrong, but knowing I can trust the ones I love to embrace me in spite of my inconsistencies, well ...that's everything. There is joy in that even when I may not feel joyful.

That's what I hear Jesus proclaiming to the church, that in our home of the church, when you and I reside in God's love we can trust that we belong, that we are chosen, wanted, loved in spite of denials or betrayals or whatever human sin riles things up. Love one another means overcoming the things that divide us, working toward reconciliation when someone has been hurt, relying on the ability of the Spirit of God to glue us together despite our tendencies to pull apart. Love one another: Jesus uses the imperative here. It's not really a question, but a commandment, I expect because he knows that when someone like Alex takes his own life, then people like his parents, his brother and his family will need others in the community to be there for them reminding them that even in this pain, God still loves, and because of that love it will get better. Maybe not tomorrow right after lunch, but it will get better. And maybe that's what it means to know Jesus' joy complete in us as a community.

You may have noticed we have 4 tables set up in the corners of the sanctuary. On each of them there's a printed photograph of a diversity of people, their hands together representing the church, and the words "I'm all in" printed. I want to invite you this morning to reflect on ways in which this church has become a spiritual home for you, a place in which you feel you belong. Listen, if you will, for God's call to reside here in all of life's ups and downs. And when you're ready—if you're ready—I invite you to go to one of the four corners and write a symbol or a statement of your commitment you are making or will make to the other people in this congregation? What commitment are you making or will you make to the other people in this congregation as we together abide in Christ's love?

Response to the Word (Acts 10, John 15)

God of Love,
do not let us grow weary of living our lives
according to the example of your child, Jesus.

Loving one another is a great challenge
and a high calling.
We do not want to fail our friend and brother.
Pour out upon us your Spirit
who reminds us that we bear Jesus' love and life
within our very being—
a powerful gift for our world.
Out of this gift, may we bear the fruit of love. Amen.