

## **Finding Joy** – John 17:9-19 (May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

“I’ll pray for you.” I am sure that those are words which most have heard at some time in our lives. I know I have.

And how did that offer of prayer make you feel? Cared for? Loved? Appreciated?

Well imagine if it was Jesus saying to you – “I’ll pray for you.”

In our scripture reading today, we hear the longest prayer of Jesus in the entire gospels. It is sometimes referred to as Christ's High Priestly prayer, and it is considered the Johannine equivalent of the Lord's prayer found in the gospels of Mathew and Luke.

But unlike the Lord's prayer, where Jesus is teaching the disciples *how* to pray – in this prayer, Jesus is praying *for* his disciples. He prays this prayer just after the farewell dinner with them, so he knows that will soon be leaving them with a critical mission. And he prays this prayer of petition, asking God for four requests:

1. He asks God to protect the disciples: *“Guard them as they continue in the world.” (v.11)*
2. He asks that they may be kept ‘holy’ and *“live in accordance with the Truth” (v.17)* that he has shown them and taught them through the word of God.
3. He asks that they are able to complete *“the mission in the world.” (v.18)*
4. And, he asks that they may be filled with joy: *“may my people have the full measure of my joy within them.” (v13)*

These four requests that Jesus makes, are rooted in his love for his followers – and they are a prayer for us today.

In this time of Covid, the prayer for protection takes on a new reality! We are perhaps a little tired of the of the need to protect ourselves with mask wearing, hand washing, and physical distances. But Jesus is praying for our spiritual health, not our physical health. In a report by Faith Today, it revealed that only 11% of Canadians are regularly involved in a church. Being a Christian is just not popular today! And it can be all too easy to get sucked into the mainstream of our non-church going society. We need that prayer for protection!

When we gather as a community of faith, we gather to pray together, to praise together, to come the table together, and to support each other in our faith journeys. The sad reality of Covid is that since most communities of faith have not been able to gather in person, then churches will see an even further decline in attendance post Covid. People will be 'out of the habit' of attending church; maybe other things will have taken over as a priority in their lives; perhaps the idea of the Sunday morning worship just doesn't work for them anymore. Church and faith is just not central in society anymore.

And we know that perhaps the church needs to change to respond to this decline in attendance. These last few days I have been attending the United Church Regional Annual meeting – and the theme this year was 'stepping out of the boat' – how can church change and be willing to leave behind some things, as they create a new way of being. Communities of faith are in a difficult time right now – and yes – we need that prayer of protection as we continue to find a new way to be the church in the world.

The prayer to be grounded in God's truth is also vital today. With the growing rise of the 'Spiritual but Not Religious Movement' – often called the SPNR – there are many mystical fads that are not grounded in God's truth. Many consider the ancient texts of scripture irrelevant in today's society. But Jesus prays for us to be grounded in God's word.

Every Thursday for the last five weeks I have been attending a course called Soul of The Preacher. As a group of Ministers we have been connecting across the country via the technology of zoom, and have been reminded of the need to use spiritual practices that help us to dwell in God's word - allowing scripture to ground us, speak to us, and show us ways to open up God's word for others.

Jesus' prayer for us to complete the mission in the world is one that I feel we are beginning to embrace more. I am encouraged by the acts of kindness, compassion, and love, for others and for our world, that we have seen during Covid. We have seen many communities live out the mission of love. Here at Grace United you have delivered food and care packages; you have sewn gowns,

scrub caps, and masks; you collected paper products for TAP; you knitted and crocheted prayer shawls; you rose to the challenge of an environmental clean up; and you have stayed connected through phone calls, and virtual coffee times. I believe that even though the numbers of those regularly attending church may be in decline – the mission of the church is alive and well!

But what about Jesus' prayer for us to be filled with joy? Jesus prays that we may have the *'full measure of joy within us.'*

What does that mean to you? What is joy?

The world in which we live tends to think of joy in terms of base pleasures – a sort of here today but gone tomorrow kind of gladness. The type of joy that taste sweet for a while, but can change rancid in a flash, sometimes leaving a bitter after taste.

But when our joy is just surface level, then it will not last through the jaws of pain, the heart wrenching disappointments and the weariness of life.

I think Covid has taught us that too. When our joy is focussed on a 'me mentality' – things that 'I want' and things that 'I need' – then it is easy to get sucked into the undertow of negativity when we can not have those things. And we might all to often find ourselves swimming in a dangerous current of depression.

But the joy that Jesus is praying for us to have, is the joy that has much deeper roots.

In Nancy Leigh DeMoss' book, 'The Journey to Joy', she describes the joy that Jesus promises. She writes:

*"(it is)the joy of hearth and home—the joy of creativity and productivity—the joy of service and benevolence—the joy of knowing and serving truth—the joy of having one's feet firmly planted on a solid foundation—the joy of being in a right relationship with God. It is these joys that Jesus offers."*

So, how can we obtain this 'full measure' and deep-rooted joy?

Earlier in John, Jesus had commanded his disciples to keep his commandments *"so that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be made full"* (John 15:11)

The joy that Jesus wants us to have, is the joy that comes from keeping the commandments – and especially the most important commandment of ‘love God with all your heart and soul.’

When our joy is rooted in our relationship with God – then we find ourselves filled with joyful gratitude. Demoss writes:

*“An important key to not becoming overwhelmed by what is going on around us, is looking for evidence of God’s hand at work in the midst of the turmoil, and being simply overwhelmed with thankfulness to God.”*

She wrote these words in 2009 – yet they are so relevant for us today.

No-one can deny that our world is in turmoil.

Jesus knew this over 2000 years ago; he knew that we would face a world fraught with difficulties – again and again and again. But he also knew, that when we are filled with the joy of experiencing God’s love – then we can overcome that turmoil with a grateful heart.

Jesuit priest, Brother David Steindl-Rast, wrote:

*“the root of joy is gratefulness. It is not joy that makes us grateful, it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”*

Dr. Berne Brown is a well-respected researcher, theologian, and author of many books about the relationship between Joy and Gratitude. She says that “after 12 years of research, and interviewing 11,000 people, she did not find anyone who described themselves as joyful, or who did not describe their lives as joyous, who did not actively practice gratitude.”

Tangibly practicing daily gratitude, leads to a life full of joy.

So how do we actively practice gratitude?

How do we intentionally allow God to delight us with Joy?

In the weeks ahead I will be offering you an opportunity to participate in ‘Stroll for the Soul.’ It will be a series of three inspirational messages each week; messages to help you to intentionally set time aside be grateful for God’s presence around us.

Perhaps when you see something that delights you with joy, you might say a word of thanks out loud to God.

Perhaps you might keep a gratitude journal of words, or drawings, or photos.

Perhaps you will daily list a 1,2,3,4,5, things to be grateful for.

Perhaps at each meal you will invite everyone seated to name aloud one thing for which they have gratitude.

In the month ahead, I invite each of us to intentionally walk with gratitude.

And I am certain that when we do, it will bridge the gap between our pain and our heartache, so we will each experience the fullness of joy that Jesus wants for us.

We will each find the deep, abiding joy that can be ours today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.