

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Jesus said to his disciples, "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." That your joy may be complete. Last month, on the second Sunday of Easter, we heard the same phrase from St. John's first letter. He wrote "We are writing these things that your joy may be complete." The idea of completion seems to hint at the endgame, the ultimate culmination of all Jesus' ministry and our Christian work. So I ask you, what is the final result and goal of our faith? What is it that we and Jesus really hope to accomplish? Just what is it that will make our joy complete?

There are some Christian traditions, those who frame their faith around a wrathful and impatient God, a God who might be heard to say "Don't make me come down there!" for whom the goal might be a world where all people just learn their lessons and behave themselves. There are some traditions who expect the completion in a future when Jesus returns as judge and separates the sheep from the goats, and woe to those who have strayed. There is also a Christian viewpoint that eternal, everlasting life is the ultimate endgame, that our joy will be complete in the next life, where all our family and friends, presumably without grudges, await us, and that we will live happily ever after. It is an interesting question...what do we hope to ultimately achieve with all this Christian effort?

Well, I'm just your priest, so you can always disagree with me, but if you asked me this question, I think I would tell you that I think all of Jesus' ministry, the work he meant for us to carry on with the Spirit's guidance, points to an endgame of reconciliation. Universal reconciliation will make our joy complete. Reconciliation is one of those five dollar church words, like incarnation, righteousness, absolution, redemption, and salvation...words which have such a particular theological meaning that they aren't much good for anything else in the language. The theological context of the word reconciliation might be compared to the joy when a family member who is estranged becomes reconciled...think of the prodigal son who humbly returns to his father. Though the son is probably lost, the father can't help himself from watching the horizon for his return, and is overcome with joy when it actually happens. God's endgame, I think, is the joy we will all share when every lost sheep is reconciled.

Of course, that sounds very idealistic, even utopian, but nothing, as scripture insists, is impossible with God. We have a pastoral liturgy in the BCP devoted to reconciliation, which encourages prayerful reflection, self-examination, and confession in the hope of forgiveness. But beyond that, I have to admit that I'm a little vague about just what Reconciliation looks like. I have a sense that reconciliation, while a desirable goal, is really more of a process, a journey, a path, a pilgrimage. It is a way of life. A way of life that reliably asks at each intersection, each circumstance, each situation, "What's the faithful thing to do now?" "What would Jesus do?" "Given this circumstance, what would make our common joy complete?" And as we ask those questions, we think of all those lofty attributes we think God has: forgiveness, compassion, creativity, mercy, grace, and, of course, love. Somehow, living with these like-minded attitudes could unleash our own creativity, reconcile our attitude and intent to God's, and bring the endgame of complete and mature joy.

The pilgrimage towards this endgame can often seem a bit vague, too. Thankfully, our Episcopal sacraments can help us find a helpful way. There are liturgies for healing, for communion with Christ, for baptism when we dedicate ourselves to living faithfully and respecting others, liturgies for accepting leadership in the faith community like confirmation and ordination, and even one for Holy Matrimony.

And sometimes these sacramental events are surprising in their depth and innovation. As Gloria read for us this morning, the Jewish disciple, now having become Christian Apostles, were astounded to find that this particular group of Gentiles were capable of receiving the Holy Spirit. According to what they had been assuming, that should not have been possible. But, given the evidence, it was decided that, what the heck, if these others had this spiritual gift from God, why not baptize them anyway. It seemed the faithful thing to do. It seemed a good way to proceed down that path that would lead to the completion of everyone's joy.

Holy Matrimony is one of our sacraments, one which helps us align our intentions to God's, and I have had some personal experience with that these past weeks. Daughter Marietta and her fiancé Shane had been planning a huge church wedding at their Episcopal parish in Rochester this coming summer. But, sadly, those nasty little Covids got in the way. Not wanting to wait any longer to be married, they decided to just simply elope. But this was no cliché elopement with a ladder to the bedroom window and a clandestine service at the Elvis chapel in Vegas. No, it was a well-thought-out event and included parents, a violinist, appropriate wedding attire, and a sunrise service in the Sedona Arizona desert. So, that was why Gale and I missed church two weeks ago. It was a secret. Even Marietta's priest in Rochester didn't know. Instead, I officiated at the service, Shane's parents were the official witnesses, and Gale walked Marietta down the aisle, or rather up the mountain trail.

Now, Arizona has a reputation for dry heat, but somehow it rained all night before the early morning wedding, and there was a chilly wind as the temperature dipped to a mere 40 degrees. Given the atmospheric conditions, the sunrise was impeded by low-hanging clouds, the violinist struggled to keep his instrument in tune, and there were visible goosebumps on the bride's exposed shoulders. But the redrock mountains behind us were even more vibrant with some moisture, the wonderful vows the bride and groom had written were more poignant, and the joy in everyone's hearts was more complete than I think anyone could have expected. And when I, as the priest, presumed to ask God's blessing on this marriage, it felt redundant, since all around us and in our hearts, God's blessing was so obvious. As Jesus says in this morning's gospel selection, we all felt that we had been chosen and appointed to bear fruit...fruit that will last. That is the sacramental formula, I think, that by sharing God's intentions we will achieve a life of reconciliation and a joy which is complete.

It may, in fact, seem overly idealistic to think that the world as we know it will ever know the complete joy of full reconciliation, but we have a durable model in Jesus' ministry, the ministry we are commissioned by our baptism to continue. Jesus worked to reconcile Samaritans with Judeans, reconcile Jews with gentiles, reconcile sinners with the self-righteous, and reconcile humans of all sorts with God. His summary of the Law, that all should love God and each other, is the way forward. And we have, in the witness of Christ, the assurance of a loving God, who at all times, and above all else, wants to be in communion with creation and in fellowship with us. Even though we might never have chosen Christ independently, Christ has chosen us. Christ has chosen all. And Christ has chosen all to be not merely servants, but friends. Friends with whom to share the way, the truth, and the life. In our Eucharistic prayer, which we will hear in just a few minutes, we pray: Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself, and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, and to *reconcile* us to you, the God and Father of all. Dear Friends, Let Christ's work of reconciliation be chosen as our own vocation; In true friendship with Christ, let our own intention be to bear good fruit in Christ's name, unleashing the creativity which creation has embedded deep in our souls. Sing to the Lord a new song, that your joy might be complete. Amen.