

“Joy”

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016

Text: John 8:31-38

What I want to do today is explain why I am thankful for the Reformation. Why I am glad to be Lutheran.

It's not about being right. Right about God, right about the Bible, right about salvation, right about theology. You might think that, from the amount of time Lutherans spend arguing over theology. But it's not. It's actually about joy restored.

I realize the readings today never use the word joy. But they lay the basis for joy.

Joy is an emotion. We usually call it happiness. We rejoice for reasons. Sometimes we do things to make ourselves happy; sometimes we search for something to be happy about. Joy needs a basis. (I haven't developed a comprehensive theory of emotions, or I would share it with you at this point. Aren't you happy that I'm going to move on?)

As our circumstances change, our emotions change. Joy comes and goes. We get sick, we get healthy. We succeed, we fail. You win, you lose. We have little axioms that help us accept the fact that we can't always be happy. Life has its ups and downs. We have coping mechanisms so that, in a pinch, we can find a little joy in something very small by ignoring large truths. Into every life a little rain must fall.

What Luther realized, and what he taught with all his heart as long as he lived, and what he attempted to promulgate within the whole church, was that one of the two most important tests of whether theology is Christian whether it restores our joy. Through faith in Christ we indeed have freedom, as Jesus says in the gospel today. But what Jesus went on to teach, a little later in the gospel of John, is that he came and lived and died and rose and passed his word on to us

so that his joy might be in us, and that our joy might be complete.

According to our Lutheran confessions, theology and practice which are Christian make Christ front-and-center in such a way that the joy Christ came to give us gets made real in our lives.

Now, I'm not going to pretend that I'm always happy. A lot of the time, maybe, but not always. Like you. A lot of the time my emotions are based on current events—in my household, in my congregation, in society, in the world. And those can certainly take us on a roller coaster. The hymn we just sang talks about devils filling the world, and people taking valuable things away from us. But what it asserts is that Jesus Christ handles all of that. So that, although we may be frightened, the freedom and peace and joy which God gives us will never be lost to us. A mighty fortress is our God, and staying in that fortress we retain our freedom and therefore our peace and therefore our joy. What a joyful song to sing in the face of earthly realities!

When troubles come, as they will, we can always revert to the most basic, the most fundamental fact of our existence: ever since we have been baptized into Christ, we have been sons and daughters who belong to the household, and who cannot be taken away from the household. We are inside. We are free. God will take care of us. We can therefore rejoice about something even greater than the trouble we see around us.

What Jesus is telling those who believed in him, in John 8, is that because our freedom and peace and righteousness and joy all have their origin in God's free gift to us, and because God is faithful, they are complete and secure.

The joy we have in Christ has so much to recommend it. For one thing, it is different from the joy of winning the lottery because it doesn't depend on chance. You always know where you will find it. It doesn't depend on your skills, either. And it never comes at the expense of other people's misery. This joy is for all, through repentance and faith, because all need to repent and the grace of God is available to all, at the same time. This joy does not wear out and become less meaningful. As we do God's work of making peace in the world, we are sure to encounter opposition—Jesus promised that—and challenges, all of which will force us to reach deep for some more of the peace and joy which gives us new energy. People need our love and service, and that is hard, and true joy is the very best fuel for our efforts. Bitter people are not much good to others. We will also stumble, and being forgiven will restore to us, as it did to King David, the joy of our salvation. Because our joy is founded on the forgiveness of our sins, like the joy of the returned prodigal, we do not have to choose between honesty about the world and ourselves. We know the truth. But the truth which is about Christ does not destroy us but sets us free.

The great thing for me personally, as a minister of the gospel, is that my duty is such a delight. It is not my work to make you better people or to keep an eye on you or make you feel guilty; nor to educate you; nor to inspire you to imitate anyone, even Jesus. My job is not primarily to help Bethlehem get bigger or survive or thrive as an organization. My aim is to offer you the gifts of God which have the power to make our joy complete, and therefore my work is "word and sacrament."

That's what John says in his first epistle, when he explains the motivation of the apostles:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our

hands, concerning the word of life-- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us--we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

"So that our joy—the joy we have in this fellowship with the Father—may be complete."

That is the same reason Paul did his mission work, and the reason Martin Luther wrote 95 theses. "So that our joy may be complete." Thanks to my training in Lutheran theology, that is also why I write a sermon, why I preside over the Eucharist, why I minister to individuals, why I lead Bible studies. "So that our joy may be complete."

And what makes joy complete? In his Gospel, John twice uses the expression "to fulfill [one's] joy." John the Baptist said that when he heard Jesus' voice and knew who he was his joy was complete. That's all it took. In the final discourse, Jesus told his disciples that he had told them "these things" so that his joy could be in them so that their "joy [might] be complete."

God's law has convinced me over the years that any sort of peace/freedom/joy I manufacture on my own while remaining enemies with God, is worthless. It is a spurious peace, a vanity. But I cannot have peace with God while I am working against God by the things I do wrong, or the things I fail to do right. While I am wronging my neighbor I am an enemy of God. I have no peace, and I am not going to have true joy. And because I cause quite enough trouble myself, and others are like me, and because there is always so much suffering going on because of our sins, there ought to be no joy on earth. Earth is Mudville, and mighty Casey will never get another hit. (You know the poem? "There was no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey had struck out.")

But in fact on account of Christ there is complete joy
right here in the world. And freedom. And peace.
With honesty. Amen.

