

*Funeral Homily: “Joy Defined By Trust”**

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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 (1 John 1:1-5).

Friends, I want to speak very briefly with you this evening about joy and celebration. I want to speak about these things not because any of us here feels joyful, or celebrative, but because joy is God’s word to us this night. Through the words of the Apostle John, God declares it is God’s purpose that our joy be full...that our joy be complete. This is no late agenda for God, no afterthought hastily thrown together for our benefit, or lifted out by the preacher in proof-text fashion from the larger context for our interim comfort. John assures us, that our joy has been God’s agenda from the beginning. It is, John testifies, a joy based solely on a single truth; the truth of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is only because of God’s love that we have the audacity to speak of darkness becoming light, of tears turning to laughter, of death’s defeat turning into life’s victory. It is only because of God’s love that we dare even to mention joy in the midst of the sorrow of this evening...but because of God’s love, we dare not omit it. Indeed, for this service to be anything less than a celebration of joy would be a betrayal of the one who has come that our joy be full, and an insult to our brother whose life, I believe (underneath the crusty cynicism), reflected the substantive joy of which the apostle wrote.

It is the kind of joy Karl Barth had in mind when he spoke of faith as being “in on God’s joke.” It is knowing something that the world does not know, like the clown at the circus who gets shot out of the cannon, or strolls casually into the lion’s cage, or gets hit over the head with a huge sledgehammer. Only the clown knows things are not as they appear. The clown knows he is safe all along, and so the clown can laugh because the clown is “in on the joke.” The joy of faith is in knowing, regardless of appearances, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Now, I can no more prove to you, or you to me, God’s love, than I can prove to you that my children are loyal or my wife faithful. But the evidence is there. All the indications of love and faithfulness are there, and so we trust. We allow that trust to inform and shape and define our future, for our joy is defined not by any feeling of the moment. Our joy is defined by our trust.

How else are we able to be here, to sing when we do not feel like singing, to pray when we do not feel like praying, to preach when we do not feel like preaching, to celebrate when we do not feel like celebrating? Where else is the source of our energy? With emotions depleted, minds confused, hearts broken, nerves shattered, and souls

empty, what is the source of our strength, if not our faith? We are here because we believe...or half believe...or want to believe...that God is faithful. We are driven here by a hope in a living, loving, powerful, purposeful, merciful, and faithful God, and so we dare to define the present not by our feeling, but by our trust.

The trust is not for this moment alone. It is a trust not meant merely to dry our tears for a night, but because God is to be trusted, we live in the confidence that our joy will be complete, and that all of those promises upon which we have invested our lives will be true.

Because God is to be trusted, we can trust that the day will come when there will be harmony in God's universe. Because God is to be trusted, we can trust that there will be peace on earth. Because God is to be trusted, we can trust that there will be justice among women and men and among nations. Because God is to be trusted, we can trust that there will be compassion for the afflicted, mercy toward prisoners, freedom for the oppressed; that little children will play without fear, that our brother Bill will live, and that our joy will be complete. Those are the promises which inform our present moment and enable us even now to rejoice in hope, and to celebrate with joy.

In closing, let me give you some words of faith which have been instructive and inspiring to me, and which I suspect speak for many of us. They are from Fred Buechner, taken from an article entitled "All's Lost, All's Found." "In the past," Buechner writes, "when my faith was strong, I always trusted God more or less. I trusted him with my life, which is to say, I trusted him, but the supposition was that I would always be in some measure alive to say to him the words of the 'Te Deum,' 'O Lord, in Thee have I trusted...let me never be confounded', meaning that I would always be around to cajole with him, plead with him, and in general to remind him to be the God of mercy and love I always trusted him to be. The change is that now I begin at least, to trust him with my death. I begin, at least, to see that death is not merely a biological necessity, but a necessity, too, in terms of the mystery of salvation. We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old. This seems to be close to the heart of that mystery." Then Buechner concludes, "I know no more now than I ever did about the far side of death as the last letting go of all, but I begin to know that I do not need to know, and that I do not need to be afraid of not knowing. God knows. That is all that matters. I trust God with my death."¹

"I tell you these things" God says to us, "in order that your joy be full."

*Preached at the funeral service of Bill Green, longtime elder of Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia.

Note

¹ Frederick Buechner, "All's Lost, All's Found," *Christian Century* 97 (12 March 1980): 284.