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Joy Made Complete (John 15. 9-17)

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The passage we just heard is part of what are known as the Farewell Discourses in the gospel of John. By this point in the story, Jesus and his disciples have shared their Last Supper together. Jesus has foretold his betrayal, Judas Iscariot has slipped off into the night, and Peter has declared (wrongly as it turns out) that he will never deny his master. After this, Jesus embarks on a long monologue. Occasionally the disciples intervene to express their confusion or ask a question, but mostly Jesus is depicted as if seeking to reveal in one final and intense burst all that he's been trying to share with his friends, all that he wants them to realise. And so, over the course of four chapters, he circles back again and again to a few key themes, most of which are visible in today's reading.

There's the theme of abiding or dwelling in love through keeping the commandment to love. Relatedly, there's the theme of becoming so deeply, personally related to Jesus, so at one with him, that we may do what he does and be as he is. He is the vine and his disciples are branches, called to bear fruit that will last. He is the friend with whom they share one life. They are not servants who do not know what their master is doing, but companions appointed and enabled to act on his behalf in the world and so to 'ask in his name' of God who is Father, equally, of them all.

And there's the theme of joy. Three times in these Farewell Discourses, Jesus tells his disciples that all he's sharing with them and asking of them is in service of their joy. In Chapter 15, he says: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (15.11). In Chapter 16, he tells them that when he returns to them on the other side of death and pain, 'you will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you'. In him, they will be drawn into unbreakable relationship, aligned as he is with the will of God, 'so that your joy may be complete'

(16.24). And in Chapter 17, when Jesus gathers up all he has shared with his disciples into his final prayer for them, he addresses God: ‘now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves’ (17.13). It’s a striking repetition – and the promise is not just of a taste or glimpse of joy but of joy ‘made complete’, perfected, consummated. Fullness of joy. The word in Greek is ‘*pleroma*’.

In certain branches of Hindu philosophy, the subjective experience of ultimate, unchanging reality is said to be of ‘truth, consciousness, and bliss’.¹ I don’t know if this notion of ‘bliss’ is equivalent to Jesus’ promised ‘fullness of joy’, but it’s an interesting parallel. And it seems consistent with the testimony from the Christian mystical tradition that breaking through into the real presence of God, knowing oneself infinitely held and beloved is a breakthrough into joy. C.S. Lewis famously described himself as being ‘surprised by joy’ and Julian of Norwich in her *Revelations of Divine Love* testified: ‘suddenly the Trinity almost filled my heart with joy. And I understood that it shall be like that in heaven without end for all that shall come there’. Jesus dwells in this presence. He abides in the love of God and therefore in this state of joy. And he wants his disciples to know it too. Listen again: ‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete’.

It’s clear that this supposedly eternal reality and availability of joy does not directly cancel the experience of pain or the fact of suffering. Jesus doesn’t pretend it does. This final burst of teaching is offered in the context of his own imminent suffering and death, and the coming persecution of his followers. He warns them about it: ‘I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming’ (14. 30); he says, ‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saccidānanda>

so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you about them' (16. 1-4). And yet, Jesus wants his followers to know that, despite what they, what we, will experience of the profound suffering, injustice and pain of the world, beneath it all, just behind the veil, is fullness of joy.

Is this true? And if so, how do we gain access to it? I imagine many of us have had our glimpses, our 'surprises'. A sudden and unlooked for sense of contentment or happiness opens up within. A piercing gratitude for light playing on leaves, a deep peace, an inexplicable hope is felt. Such moments are independent of circumstance. Leonard Cohen, who suffered profound depression for decades, spoke (quoting Ben Jonson) of how 'cheerfulness kept breaking through'. And even though such glimpses of joy fade, they can remain touchstones in our lives. We don't forget them and we do not doubt them. They ring of truth. Once we've known them, other aspects of our experience may be relativised – something we've been obsessing about suddenly seems less important, a burden we've been carrying is lightened.

So, a question I have is whether it's possible to be more reliably present to the ever-present reality of joy? Some traditions suggest that more sustained access is available as we recognise the illusory nature of suffering itself and the transience of mortal life. The less attached we are to the penultimate realities of our identity, possessions and physical bodies, the more open we are to the ultimate reality of joy. I think there's something in this. It's certainly true that some of what eclipses joy in our experience is non-necessary or neurotic suffering. There are demands we could let go, self-talk we could surrender (or at least practise surrendering), once we realise they block our reception to the kiss of joy. But not all suffering is neurotic and I'm not convinced it's illusory. Depression, anxiety, grief, fear, hunger, persecution, remorse, the terrors of war, domestic violence, sexual abuse, insanity and exile blight lives. Such suffering and our awareness of others who are suffering these things cannot, at least in any simple sense, be let go or seen through.

Jesus seems to suggest a different approach to accessing joy. He teaches that joy is the fruit of being joined to God, and being joined to God comes from loving and

letting ourselves be loved. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you'. And what is love? It's connected to presence, attention, being with and letting be. It thus necessarily takes us, as it took Jesus, into the pain of the world and the pain of our own hearts. To love the world, to love people is to be present to the tragedy of the waste of life. Where intransigence and dividedness lead to murder, ecocide, genocide, love hurts. Where blindness and greed perpetuate social and economic systems that lead to anxiety, scarcity and alienation, love hurts. For Jesus, joy is a fruit of love and love takes us into suffering. This suggests that in Jesus' vision, the experience of joy is not reliant on getting lucky in life, or on avoiding the depths of pain. Counterintuitively, it's only as we are truly present to the whole of it, including what is hurting within and without, that his joy may be in us.

There's a lot of suffering about these days. People we know and love, people we work with, people, animals, corals and forests we see on the news. In such times, it's hard to feel that joy is an ever-present reality and possibility, let alone that our joy may (or even should) be complete. But Jesus invites us: join yourself to me, attend with me to the depth of the world's pain, and come to know in and through it all the love of God. How do we join ourselves to him? This is what we do every time we love one another, every time we are moved with compassion, every time we yield ourselves in prayer – the silent prayer of meditation, the anguished prayer of solidarity and lament.

I want then to finish with a prayer, written by Jill, encouraging us in this work of love and asking for the grace to love well.

O God, As our sense of imagination has evolved such that we can think of you as a loving father, we can also imagine the feelings of other people, as Christ and many other leaders have taught us to do. And as our systems of communication have developed we have more intimate appreciation of the feelings of others as they are killed in wars or as their lives are lost in the terrible exigencies of climate change. This has the potential to bring us together as the human species to decide to change things so that such calamities don't occur so frequently or at all.

But we don't do this. We don't know HOW to do this, and that is why we pray for your help. We need your help to imagine how this could be done and then to do it. We ask for your help as individuals, in our groups, in our churches and other institutions, in our political parties and in our identities as nations, we ask how we can use our appreciation of unnecessary suffering on this planet to bear on the dilemmas our species now faces.

We ask this in the name of all the loving fathers and mothers we have been privileged to know, Amen

And so may we and all your people learn to dwell in love, and may joy be made complete.