

Easter 4 2020

John 16:16–22

St. John Lutheran Church, Palmer, KS

Theme: Christ's joy bears the cross

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus teaches about sorrow and joy, a mother's labor pains and relief. "You will be sorrowful," he says to his disciples in the upper room, "but your sorrow will turn into joy."

For the Christian, joy comes out of sorrow. In fact, Jesus himself is, as Isaiah foretold, "a man of sorrows and well acquainted with grief." Yet he also brings with him the joy of the bridegroom. The crucifix is both cause for us to sorrow over our sin and cause to rejoice in the salvation our Lord has won for us. Good Friday is both sad and good. There "Sorrow and love flow mingled down." The two are linked. Christ is he "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." Yes: **The joy of Christ is a joy that bears the cross.**

The Lord does not teach his disciples how to get rid of the cross or how to avoid all suffering. Instead, he teaches them how to bear it, and promises joy. Jesus' promise is not an unqualified: "You will rejoice." I admit, that is the sort of promise I think I would prefer. Be baptized, wash away your sins, and all your problems will go away. But that's not how it goes. We must be conformed to the image of Christ. As Paul says after he was stoned, nearly to death: "It is through much tribulation that we must enter into the kingdom of God."

Dear family of God, the joy of your Master is not a quick and easy joy. The promise is bigger than that: "Your sorrow will turn into joy." That is a God-sized promise. He who gives it is faithful, and will do it.

Following Christ is not quick. It is not easy or safe. It does not provide instant rewards for halfhearted efforts. It is not a sprint. Faith is not about the moment but endurance, the long haul, the patient wait through "the little while" of this life. It is the daily and lifelong struggle of *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief*—and that remains until we draw our last breath.

The things of our life as the baptized, living in His Kingdom and under Him, are also neither quick nor easy. Marriage is hard work and long hours. Parenting is hard work and long hours. Listening to the sermon requires effort (some Sundays more than others!). Holy Communion requires that you wait for one another. This is the way God wants it. The great temptation to us all, but perhaps especially to the younger among us, is to ditch that which does not produce quick and easy results, or to lose heart for the cause that is lived out day after day

after day. It is the temptation to wonder if our Lord's yoke is not easy and his burden not light. To find prayer and preaching, Sacrament and piety not worth the effort. To doubt that the things of God can really bring peace and joy.

We would surely not bother with the things of God had the Son of God not first bothered himself with us. For you he became the man of sorrows and was well acquainted with grief. He suffered travail and the heavy labor of the cross to give birth to you, his church. And he, like a mother holding a newborn, rejoices to have done it. He is not ashamed of you or disappointed with you. He rejoices to call you his own, to have endured the cross and shame for the joy that was set before him. His sorrow has been turned into a joy that knows no end. Even on your worst day, he knows the plans he has for you to bring you into eternal joys. Yes: **The joy of Christ is a joy that bears the cross.**

Christ explains it in terms of birth. Labor pain is a strange sort of pain in that it is both extreme and also perfectly normal. I don't know if there is any other kind of pain so extreme and also so normal. Nobody says, "Let's keep the baby in utero. Passing through the birth canal is too traumatic." No, under ordinary circumstances such pain is not cause for alarm. The doctors and nurses aren't worried about it. It is supposed to happen, and it will go away. Because we know the outcome, we don't see it as that big of a deal to be squeezed nearly to death so that you can live.

This is how the Christian should think about his own death: it is but a passing through birth into eternal life. Our death day is our heavenly birthday. We should each know how to die and call it what it is: not that big of a deal. Where is its victory? Where is the sting? For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

And so it is that Jesus lets his disciples weep and lament. Even Jesus himself wept. So we pray with David, "Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation." You are not a false Christian if you are not always and ever living in perfect joy and love. Even an Abraham, a David, or a Paul have sighed more than they exulted. The Christian lives in that "little while," waiting to see Jesus and have his joy become perfect. We fluctuate between certainty, then doubt; days of rest, then unrest; times of strength, then weakness; moments of joy, then sorrow. Only false faith is without temptation. True faith is always tempted, always fighting the good fight.

At the same time, we know the end. We know the outcome. We know **the joy of Christ that bears the cross.** We see Jesus risen from the dead, our conquering King. We have the forgiveness of sins which alone can bring us a happy conscience before God. Indeed, the joy of the Lord is our strength. Christians ought to be joyful people, yes, even happy. We ought not to wear gloomy faces all the time, being a burden to ourselves and others, always complaining about our lot in life or thinking that our heavenly Father gives us scorpions while he gives others bread.

Dear saints, you know **the joy of Christ that bears the cross**. Ask yourself this question: Why not rejoice? After all, your Jesus lives. Why not be joyful?

May the Lord who redeemed us in love and bought us by his blood daily restore unto us the joy of his salvation.

Come soon, Lord Jesus.