

# “Complete Joy”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – June 12, 2022*

Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

John 16:12-15, 23-24

For the past six months, we have been looking at passages and stories from John – the fourth and final gospel. We have heard how God so loved the world that he sent his own Son, the Word made flesh, into the world, full of grace and truth. We have listened as Jesus gathered, taught and led a group of disciples to embody the abundance of God’s grace and compassion. And here, we are told by Jesus that though he no longer lives among us on earth, the Holy Spirit continues to lead us into truth and understanding; that though there are some things we cannot now bear, we will continue to be guided by the Spirit who speaks with the same authority and power, so that we will never be left alone and our joy will be complete.

For new parents, like Dan and Molly – who bring their young son Cooper William to be baptized here today – these words ring out with assurance and hope. For, as much as we might try to prepare, there are many things that new parents do not – and cannot – know. I could have never known the joy of looking into your child’s eyes, or hearing them speak their first words. I never anticipated that there would be nights when my croupy son would only sleep when I cradled him in my arms and walked him up and down the stairs, again and again. I had no concept of how it would feel when your child turns sixteen and starts driving; and you anxiously wait up to make sure they arrive home safely. These are things that you can’t anticipate; you only understand them when they are experienced.

At this point in John’s gospel, Jesus knows that his time remaining with his disciples is short. Alongside Jesus, they have seen and heard and experienced much; but Jesus knows that there will be times in the future where they will encounter challenges that cannot be anticipated. So, Jesus promises them that the Holy Spirit will come to take his place. The Spirit will be with them and speak to them and declare to them what is true.

It is clear that Jesus, here, has a passionate interest in communication. Jesus knows that when we are uncertain – when we face situations that are new and unanticipated – questions and doubts will arise. Thus, we are encouraged to listen for the Holy Spirit speaking. How do we do this? In the church, we do this in several ways. First, we pray. We present our questions and our doubts to God, asking for guidance. Second, we listen to each other, seeking out the guidance of others who already have faced similar situations. Within the community of faith, there exists a great accumulation of wisdom, in this day and from generations past. And third, we serve. When we are called upon to give of ourselves – our time, our support, and our compassion – we answer that call.

When parents present their children for baptism, members of the congregation are asked to pledge their support for the parents in helping their children grow into a greater understanding of God's love. This is because the Christian faith is not something that can be experienced or fully known within one family. And so, whether it is this congregation or a number of different ones over the span of a child's growth, a partnership is formed to help nurture new generations of young people into the understanding of God's love revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so, on this Trinity Sunday, we acknowledge and welcome the Holy Spirit as the continuing, ongoing messenger of God's love for the world and the gift of Jesus Christ, so that our joy may be complete. For, like new parents, there are many things we need to hear, even if we cannot fully bear them now. In a rapidly changing and confusing world, we – the church – must continue to listen and learn how to react and respond to the changes taking place around us. How, for example, do we respond to potential changes in reproductive rights and immigration laws? What reaction does the church have to gun violence and civil rights challenges? Regarding each of these fluid and rapidly-changing questions, we must continue to pray, to listen to one another, and to assume a posture of service, support and compassion.

And, as we know, there will continue to be more questions and issues to face as we move into the future. How should we be caring for our environment? What are the ethical implications of new technologies like Artificial Intelligence? How much will we worry when our teenagers are out on the road alongside automated and driverless cars?

Jesus knew that peering into the future like this can be overwhelming. Thus, on the eve of his departure from his disciples, he sought to assure them that –

though they were not ready for the answer to every question or doubt – God will continue guiding and speaking to them through the voice of the Spirit. Not every fear needs to be dispelled in order for us to be assured of God’s love for us; not every answer needs to be readily available for us to experience joy.

“Ask and you will receive,” Jesus says. The response to prayer may not be immediate; in fact, it is sometimes better if we have time to process our fears and work through our doubts. The promise, here, instead is that we will not be left alone; God will never abandon us. Though we may not know our futures, or those of the ones we love, Jesus assures us that we are never left alone in the uncertainty. Not yet having the answer does not mean that God is not with us. Instead, even in the midst of ambiguity and unknowing, God is here.

And if God is here – through the guidance and voice of the Holy Spirit, sparing us from being overwhelmed by immediate answers to all our questions and doubts – then the complete joy that Jesus speaks of here becomes all-the-more possible. If we can allow our future worries to rest in God’s hands, then we might better be able to focus on the present. Thus, we might wonder at today’s sunset rather than doubting whether the sun will rise tomorrow; we can fully appreciate our child’s first day of kindergarten without worrying where they will get into college.

God blesses us with these moments – maybe isolated, sometimes fleeting – of complete joy. Often, we do not create or earn them; they are gifts to be received. But if we are wrapped up in questions and doubts, we certainly might miss them. Thus, on a day like this, when we have the opportunity to celebrate the baptism of this child, this little miracle of God, we are called also to remember our own baptism: how we have each been created and chosen and marked as God’s own beloved child. Through the voice of the Spirit, God will continue to speak to our questions and doubts; they need not all be answered now. And so, for today, let us be washed anew in the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.