

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all time, we quickly approach the time we have set aside for Thanksgiving. Our tables are preparing for a full meal of all the typical things we think of with the holiday and some things we might not. We set our tables for family and friends, or we go to be with family and friends. The time is festive and full for many of us. However, God, we remember that all do not necessarily share the privilege of a full table and the company of family and friends. Some will spend this holiday alone, with grief, with trouble, or with other issues that prevent them from celebrating cheerfully, and no parade or football game can fill that void. May we celebrate with them in mind, assisting where we can, and being mindful that thankfulness is not an end in itself but moves us to serve more.

We see many roadblocks to thankfulness. We try to control too much; we get out of perspective and make the small things seem like the most important issues in our lives. Allow us, though, to ground our thankfulness in a life of joy. We know that this joy does not come from without but within. We find joy in abiding in the True Vine, Jesus Christ, who feeds us and allows us to bear fruit just as a vine gives life to all of its members. Walk with us, this week and beyond, to be people of joy, joy that roots us in the midst of tribulation and trouble, joy that spreads life to all people we meet. Help us to find that joy in the midst of all those things we have spoken here and those things in our hearts; we entrust them all to you. We pray this in the name of the Lord of Joy, Christ Jesus, who taught us to pray...

## SERMON

It's a great day; we're all here and Thanksgiving is coming very soon. All of these things mean we should be happy. Are you all happy today? If not, why not? What's keeping you from it? Don't you know that in order to be thankful you have to be happy? Or

can we just choose a happy mindset? Aren't we supposed to be happy at all times as a Christian? No, that doesn't always work in life, and we shouldn't chase our tails that way.

There are too many so-called "self-help" gurus that think that life is all about mindset; once we change our mindset, everything will be all happy and beautiful. They believe we can choose to be at our best at all times. There are many Christian authors that say the same thing, but the message here is bankrupt. Maybe, in the moment, we can choose happiness. However, we can be led to think that the only reason life is not fantastic is because you aren't trying enough to be happy. That's an unfaithful perspective and unsupported by scripture. It doesn't lead to thankfulness; it leads to frustration because we aren't always happy and can't be. Happiness doesn't last, but something else does.

We do have some control of what we believe and how we feel, but we also recognize that we can't control how we respond to certain things. You can't choose not to grieve. You can't choose not to be unhappy about how something goes down at work that truly affects you. You can't just decide you won't be unhappy about an unfortunate circumstance happening to your family. There are many psalms where the author cries out in grief and struggle, asking, "Where are you, God?" They may be overcome by the struggle in the moment, but it resolves itself into hope in the future. They are grounded in something that leads them to resolve that God will be with us through all times and that the future has great possibility, and that is not happiness. It's not about personal responsibility in fostering happiness, and, therefore, thankfulness, or counting on outside circumstances to make us happy and thankful; we root ourselves in the one who holds us, our circumstances, and how we can grow. We root ourselves in the True Vine, and that grows into a life of faithful joy. Thankfulness follows. You've heard me discuss joy in the past, but it's a good

time to look at it in depth at this very poignant time of intended joy. Let's take a look at what joy is, what scripture says about it, and how we foster it, which leads to thanksgiving.

Want to know what makes me joyful? I'm looking forward to time with my new family and my wife in Pennsylvania this week. It gives me joy to reflect on the service of Church Conference and celebrating jobs well done. It gives me joy to see the Bears win each week and to see the Packers lose. No, wait, that just makes me happy, but it's pretty close. Let me take some time to address a few preconceived notions. Our culture uses joy and happiness as synonyms; it thinks these are two words that describe the same thing. I present to you that they are far from the same. Our culture feeds on happiness because it thinks that happiness provides deep content, but it keeps coming back to the same reservoir to feed more. But happiness doesn't provide content. Happiness is of-the-moment; happiness comes and goes as it pleases. Happiness, well, makes us singularly happy. We cannot be sad or grieve or struggle when we are happy. It's like candy; it makes you feel good in the moment, but then it goes away and you can't recapture it. It's not a bad thing, but it's not consistently sustainable. You've heard me say that it doesn't tell us to be happy in the Bible. It doesn't anywhere. Never think that Christ calls you to be happy; Christ leads us to be joyful. Joy is different. Joy is not of the moment. Joy does not come and go but lasts. Joy gives hope for the future and perspective on the past. Joy doesn't come from what is around us but what is in us. We don't try to be joyful; we grow in joy.

Our first scripture tells us the source of joy. In these chapters of John, Jesus knows he is about to go away, and he provides his followers with advice for the future. This is one of the most reassuring passages in the bible, but it is also one of the most re-orienting. "I am the True Vine," he says, "and my Father is the Vine Grower...Abide in me as I abide in

you.” I love this language of abide. It literally means that we rest, we live in, we put everything in Christ. That sounds gooey and lovely, but it means something real and deep. It sometimes means we be uncomfortable, that we sacrifice, that we go and we do that which we do not want. Often when we get up and do those things we’d rather not we find richness; we find true joy and growth in union with Christ.

I think this is a very rich image that we can decipher and find deeper meaning. We want to take as a threat or admonition that we can be cut off and thrown away if we are not obedient, but there is no real threat to that in this passage. It’s more of a frank observation and the reality of a plant. Think about how a real vine works. When the branches don’t take in nutrition, they become malnourished and quickly die. However, when nutrition is brought in, the branch flourishes. It buds, it bears fruit, it grows in new ways. But it needs tending to grow all the more full and ripe. In the same way, we need tending and ripening. When we abide in Christ, we seek to grow always. We seek to become the best member of the Body of Christ we can possibly be. As a result, we will find those places where we need tending and growth. Almost literally, we will need to cut off parts of our lives that do not sustain Christian growth. It may be a place of selfishness, a place of self-righteousness, a lack of honesty, or a place of anger that has not been fully explored. Maybe to cut these things off is to recognize them for what they are. Maybe it’s something else for you, but we each have stumbling blocks drawing us away from full relationship with ourselves and God. Abiding in the True Vine helps us grow into what God calls us to be in this world, and in joy.

Have you ever struggled with someone who had less stringent ways they conducted themselves in the world? How about those who are much more stringent than you are? It may be about the Christian life, or personal opinions, or just about anything. They have the

ability to affect us, to make us want to correct them. I can be a little more stringent when I lend things to another person, especially my electronics, but I don't see the Christian life as getting everything exactly right. However, when we try to be over-correcting or make people what we want, we are not following Christ; we do not make disciples when we try to convert other people to be just like us, and we find no joy in that either. This scripture from Romans is a little less straightforward about the joyful life. In this passage, Paul is talking about the new Christian life around his immediate context. At this time, there was growing opinion around what was allowable and proper. What we eat was still in question. There were great dietary restrictions with the Levitical Laws, and some who followed this New Way still wanted to adhere to them. Paul gives instructions that it really doesn't matter. Some felt led by their consciences to refrain from certain food and drink, just as many do today. Paul makes exception for that while explaining that we need not condemn those who refrain. In today's age, some Christians prefer to refrain from drinking alcohol or eating certain kinds of food. Jesus makes all things clean, but that's OK. Paul's main point, though, gets easily hidden in the midst of the rest of the narrative in verse 17: "For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." What is external, what we eat and drink, may allow for some measure of religious meaning, but true faithfulness, true joy, comes from within through relationship. That joy is fed by the way that we conduct ourselves, in the way we treat others and work out a faithful life. Some may see Christianity strictly, in a very set and formulaic way. On the other hand, some do not, and both are OK when we live in loving relationship with each other. We all serve the same Christ. A life rooted in the True Vine, a life that lives out this internal joy won't center on other's preferences but will focus on loving relationship.

In the past, you've heard me discussing fostering a life of joy. We can have joy even when we are not at our best; we can hold onto joy when we grieve, when we are unhappy, when we struggle because joy has a different source and a different fuel than those things. Now we get down to how we can do that in light of our scripture. We know that joy does not come from the outside; it only comes from within, from following and abiding in the True Vine. We can feed our joy from the outside, but joy comes from the heart in relationship with the True Vine. We gain the energy of joy by abiding in him and letting that joy feed us through all parts of life, the happy and unhappy times. When we live into the calling of Christ, we do the same. Being with and serving others can feed that joy because Christ calls us to be in relationship with one another. When we love our neighbor and serve selflessly, we are abiding in the True Vine and his teachings. At Bible study, we discussed "Joy to the World." We will sing it very soon, and very intentionally. We do not sing "Happiness to the World," for the Lord has come and that does not make us happy. It makes us joyful, as his coming changed everything and lasts when happiness fails.

I believe we find joy when we are living fully as who we are, because we find who and how God wants us to live. I find joy when I hear people engaging with my sermons, for I'm living as God intends me to live and people are questioning how they can live better with Christ. How do you discover joy? I think we can when we gather with family and friends this holiday. That is not the source of our joy, but it feeds our internal joy because family helps us live into the relationship that the True Vine prompts. Little things around us can prompt joy when they remind us of good times with family and friends. There again we recognize the importance of relationship and how it defines us as humans. When we

live in connection with others, we are abiding in the True Vine. After all, at the end of the day, one cornerstone of Jesus' incarnation is that he came to be with us in relationship.

Thankfulness has many aspects. We know what we have, we appreciate what we have, and we recognize these things in light of our limited time on this earth. We engage the world with perspective and not get focused on the little things that can easily consume our time and energy. We approach the world not trying to control things, especially those things we absolutely cannot. And we root it all in joy, which comes from within and from abiding in the True Vine, Jesus Christ. We live in the teachings he provides, which feed our joy. The season can easily get out of sorts with all those things that easily draw us away from what's really important. The turkey gets overdone, the stuffing isn't exactly the way we want it to be, that one annoying family member is doing that thing that drives everyone crazy. In the midst of these small inconveniences, let our root be joy from the True Vine, as joy lasts among the happy times, the sad times, all times and helps us recognize in whom we belong and that everything is just fine. Thanks be to God for abiding in us as we seek to abide in God. Amen and Amen.