

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 119:89-105

The Lord exists forever; your word is firmly fixed in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment they stand today, for all things are your servants. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts. The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your decrees. I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad. Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Old Testament Lesson—Ecclesiastes 2:24-26a

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy;

New Testament Lesson—John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Keen observers and those familiar with the church calendar might recognize these words from John’s gospel as the traditional text used during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday.

That special day, of course, is when we remember Christ’s humility—exemplifying what it means to serve others by washing the feet of his friends.

But more than that: We remember Christ’s command to love one another—to love our neighbors with the same fervor—the same depth of devotion—with the same “all in” mentality as Jesus did then and still does today.

In fact, I think this may be the clearest Jesus ever is, in terms of laying out in blunt terms exactly what we're getting into—what we, as his followers, are called to do. Jesus lays it right out—no sugar added...

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Repeat)

You see: These words come from a section of John's gospel many refer to as the "farewell discourses"—essentially a long goodbye conversation Jesus is having with his disciples.

He knows very well what's coming. He's been anticipating it for some time—hinting at it—showing glimpses of future glory—doing his best to prepare his inner circle...

Of course, his words aren't just for the benefit of his disciples then. They're also essential for his disciples now—especially in these troubling times.

Praise God, though! We don't have to worry about saying "Goodbye" to Jesus like his first followers did. But we do need to prepare ourselves for the journey ahead.

And so, it's good for us to know what Christ has in mind when he commands us to love one another. And it's clear he isn't talking about any superficial kind of love. He's not talking about a love that's easy or convenient or even gratifying.

No, the kind of love Jesus means doesn't benefit the person in the mirror. It is totally focused outward. It's never self-centered, but wholly other-centered.

We're told there's no greater love than this—none more powerful, none more meaningful. My friends: This is love's apex—love at its pinnacle. And, by the way, we can trust that this is really what love looks like at its highest heights.

After all, these are the words of Love in the flesh—Love in human form—Love Incarnate. You might say Jesus holds a particular expertise in the field.

"Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus says. You haven't yet witnessed the extent of that love. You haven't yet seen its heights—its potential—haven't yet seen how far God will go to claim you as children and bring redemption to Creation...not yet...

But you will...sooner than you think, you'll bear witness to the greatest act of love. When "it is finished," you'll understand...you'll understand the kind of love I mean...the kind of love I pray you'll show each other and reflect into the world.

Love one another as I have loved you: with a self-sacrificial love. This is my command.

For the past several weeks now, we've made God's gift of joy our primary focus. We wanted to showcase the abundance of joys available to us—present around us every day—joys we encounter throughout Scripture and life.

Our hope is to push back on the common narrative that joy is something rare—something reserved only for ultra-special occasions. We want to debunk the idea that joy's been somehow made more scarce these days—that it's been stifled by politics and world events and survives only as a slow drip-drip-drip...It's just not true. None of that is.

The truth is joy is part of that abundant life promised to us by Christ. You see: the Apostle Paul instructed the Roman church to never be ashamed of the gospel.

And in much the same way, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John made it incredibly clear that we are never to be ashamed of grabbing hold of God's joys and brandishing them to a skeptical world—a world that seems to doubt joy's abundance more and more.

What I appreciate the most about our lesson from John's gospel this morning is that Jesus directly connects joy with what God requires of us. And hear me out on this. Pay attention because I don't think the connection Jesus makes here gets the attention it deserves.

Hear his words again: *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

There it is—Jesus holding together what he expects of us—the commandments—with a joy that comes not just from anywhere, but directly from Christ’s own heart: *so that my joy may be in you.*

This, my friends, is why we can be confident that joy isn’t some endangered species. Joy isn’t rarer than it used to be! We know this because it flows like a fountain from the miraculous, beating heart of Christ Jesus! When Jesus said, “abundant,” he meant it.

The incomparable poet, Mary Oliver, really captures this idea beautifully—as she does with most things actually. She writes that, “joy is not made to be a crumb.” Joy is not made to be a crumb. How awesome is that?

Following her metaphor, I could argue that joy is better thought of as a feast—a banquet that takes place at the Lord’s own table—hosted by Love Incarnate—Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.

Siblings in Christ, I want you to take a moment and imagine the vast multitude of ways we’re called to live selflessly. Consider all the opportunities we have serve our neighbors—to put others first—opportunities to use our time, talents, and treasures—and doing so in ways that showcase Jesus’ sacrificial love working through us.

Seriously, think about it. How many in a day? A week? Or a month? Too many to count. We are overwhelmed with ways to love one another.

And sure...all those opportunities to demonstrate God’s love—to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world—it can seem daunting, right? It can feel like too much—too many expectations—too many ways for us to fail and disappoint our Creator. Yeah, I get that.

So here’s what I really want you to take away from this. It’s time we reorient ourselves and change our perspective. Instead of thinking of God’s commandments as all the ways we could potentially let God down, let’s start imagining them as reasons to tap into the Source of all joys!

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

My friends: As many times as we love one another on a given day, Christ’s own joy is poured anew into our hearts! As many times as we reflect God’s love into the world, we experience joy divine—joy afresh deep within our souls.

And so every act of loving service is an occasion for joy! Every moment we intentionally put the needs of others before our own is a celebration—and there is great rejoicing in heaven.

Just imagine—imagine the virtually limitless moments of joy out there. How many in a day, a week, or a month? What about a year? How would you measure that?

Well, luckily the stellar Broadway musical, *Rent*, gives us a great answer to that. In its unforgettable, showstopping number, the question is asked, “How do you measure a year?” How do you measure a year?

Answer: “How about love? Measure in love.” As many minutes as there are in a year (525,600 to be exact), can be as many moments of joyful blessing we feel.

And, who knows: Maybe we’re not meant to measure how well we’re doing on the journey of faith—as if we could know our ratio of commandments fulfilled, or the ways we’ve let joy fall by the wayside. Maybe not...

But if we could—if we could measure our spiritual progress, well then I'd suggest how often we intentionally love our neighbor is probably not a bad method of doing so.

Yeah, you know, the more I think about it, the more I lean towards the wisdom of *Rent*.

How do you measure a year? How do you measure a life well lived? How do you measure the journey of faith? How do you measure how often we please God and magnify the joy of Christ?

How do you measure all that?

How about love? Measure in love.

Amen.