

NO GREATER JOY

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ April 10, 2016

^{1:1} That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete. ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. ^{2:1} My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:1-2:2)

Grace, peace and joy to you from our Savior Jesus Christ,

A famous religious leader made his way to a spa for much needed relaxation. While there, letting his body and mind relax in the sauna, he spied a man who caused him to immediately get up and exit not only the sauna, but the spa itself. The reason being this man was a popular heretic – and the religious leader did not want to be in the sauna when the righteous wrath of God collapsed the building. This religious leader was none other than the Apostle John. The popular heretic was a man by the name of Cerinthus, and the story comes to us from a disciple of the Apostle John – Polycarp.

Even though this story did not find its way into the Bible, it reflects the passion which John had in not only proclaiming, but defending the truth. A truth that in his words, **“he saw, heard, looked at, and touched.”** May we be as passionate as John was about the truth, and let us not become apathetic in proclaiming or defending it. This truth was testified to by many witnesses, and it is this truth that is the basis of the Easter Gift we consider this morning – The Word of God.

Maybe we don’t always look at the Bible in our hands or sitting on our shelves as a gift, but it really is. And when we actually open it up we can discover that joy for ourselves. John said, **“we write this to you to make our joy complete”** and in another letter that **“Greater joy I do not have than these things, that I keep hearing my own children walking in the truth.”** John doesn’t make those claims lightly, and neither should we take it lightly. Instead, we will use that phrase as the theme of our sermon this morning and see how there can be NO GREATER JOY:

1. Than unity with God
2. Than unity with believers

(1)

There are many things in this life that can give us joy. The birth of a new child, the graduation from school, a wedding, a promotion, retirement even. Think back to what that felt like at one of these times. There was a happiness, a feeling of pride. You were joyful. This was the emotion the aged Apostle John had not about himself, but about those whom he taught. He had the pride of a teacher.

The apostle John was a well-known teacher. This was the same man who wrote the gospel of John and the book of Revelation. He had been through a lot. He had been forced to flee Jerusalem when the Romans destroyed it. And now he lived in the town of Ephesus, which was a large commercial city on the western edge of modern day Turkey. It was to Christians surrounding Ephesus to whom John is writing. He was writing to fight against an ancient heresy that threatened the unity of the church. If John took joy in unity, he took no joy in those attempting to break that unity.

Cerinthus, the man mentioned in the introduction was one of those who was trying to break this unity. He denied the gospels, he denied unity with John, he even denied that Jesus was the Son of God. But Cerinthus also claimed unity with God, he claimed that what he taught was true, and what John taught was false. You can see why John began with the words that he did. **“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen, with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”**

There are two important reasons John gave for why his words, the Word of Life can be trusted as valid and true. Did you catch them? The first reason John gave was this message he was proclaiming was more than just something he heard from a friend of a friend. It was more than just something he came up with in his head. It was something that he heard from the women coming from the tomb on Easter morning. It was something he himself saw with the empty grave clothes. It was what he observed closely when he examined the risen body of Jesus on the evening of Easter. It was what he touched when he placed his fingers in the holes the nails left behind in his hands. This was more than enough evidence to trust what John was saying. But it was not just John who heard, saw, observed and touched, it was the other disciples too. It was on these multiple witnesses that the truth about the Word of Life was established.

Cerinthus couldn't hope to begin to compete with that sort of validity, and neither can any other religion compete with the bedrock foundation which the Bible has. But it's what the Word of God achieves that completes John's joy. It gives us life, and it gives us life because it gives us unity with God. This is what gives John NO GREATER JOY. Is that where your joy is found?

Let's face it, sometimes we find more joy in our sins than we do in coming to church. The devil twists our minds and convinces us that something will be good, pleasurable, make us happy, when God clearly says that isn't the case. Sometimes we even try to twist God's Word ourselves and say that God would make an exception for me sleeping with someone whose not my spouse because we love each other. God really didn't mean for us to show respect to the kind of government we have today. In short, we find joy in tearing others

down, building ourselves up, sometimes even in the name of Christ. Dear friends, God takes no joy in that. John says, **"God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him, yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth."**

There is no joy in darkness, and the joy that the devil promises is an empty joy. This empty joy is what we deserve, because there is nothing good in us. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote, **"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."** Even the good intentions and the good actions do nothing to bring us into the light. And all we have deserved from God is an eternity in the outer darkness of hell. And John realizes this, and so he says the only way we can walk in the light is because **"the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."** This is the only way we can have unity with God. The only way we can stay in the light is not by doing something, but by letting go of something – our sins.

This is precisely what John was talking about – **"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin."** John was a realist. He realized that even believers continue to sin. But a believer should not have a resigned attitude, but rather a renewed attitude to live as children of the light. And when we do fall, we do not excuse it, but rather we turn back again to the one who took our place. **"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins."** This is where we find NO GREATER JOY, than our unity with God.

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This is a unity that every believer has right now as a result of God's work through Jesus and the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. We have a unity with God. But that isn't the only reason that John wants to share the Word of God with people. He writes that in verse 3 of his first letter, **"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us."** Fellowship is one of the church words we use for unity. So John's joy is made complete not only when we have unity with God (through Jesus), but when we have unity with other believers.

This is something that I hope every believer strives for, to have unity with other believers. But once again, John gives a basis for this unity. **"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another."** Do you see, the basis for this unity we are to have with other believers is none other than the very Word of God we believe and preach. We want to be united in the light, we want to be united in God's Word. So how does look practically speaking?

I would hope every church out there – Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Non-Denominational would claim to believe what the Bible says. And at first glance there may not seem to be many differences, and the differences that there are, seem to be minor. So would John have NO GREATER JOY in having all the believers in these different churches unite? Of course he would, but not at the expense of the truth. But how can we find the truth? Simple, we study God's Word.

Instead of digging in your heels and saying, "I'm a Lutheran and I'm right" or even by saying "I'm a Christian and I'm right," let go of that self-centered view and open up the pages of Scripture. Open up and see what God's Word says. And when there is a difference in belief – say for instance in what baptism is – instead of digging in those heels, we look at what God's Word says in every place about baptism. We look at

the context, and instead of molding God's Word to make it fit with my understanding, and my reasoning, I must mold my will and my understanding to God's Word.

If we think about it, there should be no way that finite human beings like ourselves should be able to understand everything about an infinite God. And when there are places we don't understand, we can put our trust in the true Word of God. Now while every believer should strive for unity, we also realize because we're human, we may not be able to see eye-to-eye on every doctrine the Bible brings up. What then? We can rejoice in the unity that believer has with God, but that doesn't mean we can say we're united when we clearly aren't.

It is this principle of unity that we take very seriously at Grace Lutheran Church. When we have people that want to join in the unity with this congregation we want to know what they believe and we want them to know what we believe. This is one of the reasons that we practice member communion. After the sermon, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. We will ask our members, those who have confessed a unity with what we believe, to come forward, and be united in receiving the Lord's Supper. Up until recently, this was a common practice in all churches.

In doing this, we are not saying non-members are unbelievers, we are not saying that non-members don't receive the forgiveness of sins. We are merely confessing the unity we have as members of Grace. And while waiting to receive the Lord's Supper might be difficult, you can ask those who have waited, what a blessing is to have been able to go through the teachings of Scripture and be united in them. An opportunity to do this is starting this Thursday evening. And if you're a guest among us, I hope you take advantage of that.

None of this makes any sense from a human standpoint. Humanly speaking, it would be more joyful to let everyone decide who God is in their own mind. Humanly speaking, it would be more joyful to forget about these "minor" differences among Christians and just unite. And while there may be many who would be happy with that, it is not the joy that John describes, and it is not the joy that God has in mind for his followers. Rather the joy God wants us to know is the unity we have with God because of sins forgiven in Christ, and the joy of believers united in every word of his truth. And when we step out of the darkness, and walk in the light, we will know NO GREATER JOY. Amen.