

## A JOY NO ONE CAN TAKE AWAY

John 16:21-22

May is graduation month—not just what happened at Iowa State University last weekend, but at high schools and colleges all over the country. May is also when many churches like our own hold confirmation. In graduation you have a speech given. In church the pastor preaches a sermon. But first let's go back to the “graduation speech” given in our Gospel lesson:

*I tell you the truth; you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to her child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child has been born.*

Jesus was talking to His disciples on the night when He died. He had instructed them for three years. Now with His death, resurrection, and ascension He would no longer be in front of them to guide and teach them. They would be “graduating” to that new level.

Graduation speakers will warn graduates of challenges, but for the most part they will talk about the bright future that awaits them. Jesus seems to say the same. “In a little while you will see Me no more, then after a little while you will see Me. You will grieve, but your grief will be turned to joy.” There might be some problems, but beyond that is good stuff.

Jesus concludes by saying, “No one can take away your joy.” That's a great promise, but is it true? That could be hard to see for early Christians like the disciples. All of them would die for their faith, many in painful ways. They would be mocked, disowned by relatives, live in poverty, and travel to many places without enjoying a comfortable retirement and receiving recognition in their own time. None of them would be “successful” as we see success in our world today. So where was the joy for them?

We probably won't face those things in our lives because we follow Jesus, but where is the joy for us? For His disciples after Easter there was a great joy in Jesus being alive. But there were so

many bad things that happened to them to wonder if Jesus was wrong in His promise. Today our problem is not so much that the joy might be taken away, but that we don't have it in the first place.

The Declaration of Independence speaks of the fundamental rights of all people to, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” After World War II the American dream was to get a good car, marry a nice girl, buy a house in the suburbs, and have several healthy children. Now we have to add to that several cars each with garages, children who star on the track team and become National Merit Scholars, a vacation house, I-phones, tablets, and all the other electronic gadgets. But do we ever “graduate?” Do we ever reach happiness? Where is the joy?

C. S. Lewis wrote a book on joy. He described joy this way. A group is lost for hours in the woods. Then one of them sees a sign directing them to the way out. He tells everyone. They stop what they are doing and join him in looking at it. They are filled with joy. But that joy doesn't make them stand there. They begin to walk in the direction the sign tells them to go. As they walk they see other signs. They feel a burst of energy each time they see a sign, but instead of stopping at the sign to celebrate, they move on ahead. The joy they received from those signs didn't make them want to slow down and be filled with happiness. No, the joy made them move on toward their goal.

“No one can take away your joy.” Jesus is not promising that we'll get to a point in this world where we can coast, just be happy, and have no problems. Instead He promises joy, signposts in this confusing world in which helps us move towards Him. Joy and happiness are not the same thing. An alcoholic can be very happy while drinking, but he doesn't have joy. He is trapped in his addiction. A man can be happy as he acts out his sexual desires through pornography. But that is not joy. We can be happy when we have that extra car or new furniture or video game. But that doesn't mean we have joy. Joy is deeper. And we can have joy when we feel lousy, when we've had a bad day, when nothing seems to go our way. Joy

is a feeling, not a goal we obtain. Joy is a gift given to us by God.

“Graduation” comes from a word that means “step.” The idea is not that you now stop, but go up another step to continue going up steps. Two weeks ago we had confirmation here at Memorial. Confirmation is like graduation. It is not about saying, “I’ve done it! Now I can relax. There is nothing more to learn about my faith.” Actually in confirmation we speak the same words that were spoken for us by our sponsors (godparents) when we were baptized—“Do you renounce the devil and all his way and works?” “Do you believe in God the Father?” “Do you believe in God the Son?” “Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” Instead of having someone answer for us, we did it for ourselves that day.

But we were only confirming it. It is like confirming a reservation. The reservation has already been made, but the confirmation shows that we know that. God already gave everything we need in Baptism. From that time we were no longer lost in the woods Lewis wrote about in his story. We received joy in Baptism. In confirmation we got a good reminder of that by telling people in church that we recognized that. But it doesn’t lead us to stop and say, “I’m all done.” No, it is like those signs in the woods, showing us the way out, keeping us moving even and especially when we don’t feel so happy. It is something we can do each and every day!

Jesus compares our faith to a woman giving birth. During labor she is in great pain, wondering, “Is this worth it?” But after delivering the child the pain is all forgotten as she embraces her newborn baby. Right now we can feel in labor, wondering about where God is. By when He comes again all the labor will be done and we will experience gladness with Him. But until then we have His “signs”—God’s Word, a Sunday School lesson, sermons, devotions, and conversations with other Christians that give us joy, God’s joy, a joy that can never be taken away.

Rick Reilly was a regular writer for Sports Illustrated. The magazine has a regular article called “Faces in the Crowd,” recognizing young local athletes. Reilly was contacted by an Iowa truck driver named Mark Lemke whose son had

been quite a golfer until he was killed at age 19 in a motorcycle accident. Reilly wrote the article. Reilly’s way of describing how devastating this loss was to Lemke was to write, “Lemke, 51, is just an ex-jock with a simple life that a motorcycle drove a hole through.”

Several months later Mark Lemke was contacted by a man who introduced himself as Tony Dungy. Lemke thought it was some kind of joke. Dungy was the coach of the world champion Indianapolis Colts. But the man insisted he was Dungy and told Lemke he called because he read the article. Dungy’s own 18-year-old son hanged himself just days before Christmas of 2005.

Since then they stayed in contact, even when Dungy was busy with football coaching. Lemke drove an 18-wheel rig to Miami the day before the Superbowl and met Dungy for the first time. They hugged. They prayed. They visited. They talked about their loss, but especially about how their faith can get them through it. You see they share not happiness, but joy.

God has given us each other to be like Tony Dungy and Mark Lemke to each other, to be signs pointing in the midst of our pain the Christ, the joy which can never be taken away from us.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman  
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