

No Greater Joy

Sermon by Bob Arbogast

Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

February 25, 2019

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Sermon

We haven't read the Third Letter of John yet. We're on Week 4, and John's letters won't be until Week 15. But when we do get there, I'm looking forward to one sentence especially. It's a sentence I've never been able to get out of my head, both as a father and as a pastor.

This is what John says. He says, "I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children are following the truth" (3 John 4 NLT). That's worth repeating. "I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children are following the truth." And the truth, of course, is Jesus!

I'VE BEEN A PASTOR FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS. And I've been a father for more than 30 years. Sometimes, for better or for worse, those two roles come very close together.

Twenty-five years ago, I was the pastor of a church in Kalamazoo. Things were going well. Then, all of a sudden, they weren't. Over the next two years, the church became toxic: for me, for Jan, and for our kids. Eventually, we'd had enough. We were done with that church. And I was done with being a pastor. Never again!

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Two years later, we stuck a toe in at a church in Columbus, Ohio. It was scary. We weren't sure we could trust a church again. But God was calling.

From the start, I told the church they had a job to do. I told them they had to be a blessing to our daughters. They had to be Jesus to our daughters. Six years later, on a Sunday morning, our three daughters stood up together in that church to declare their faith in Jesus. As a father and as a pastor, I could have no greater joy than that.

BACK IN THE FIRST CENTURY, the church in Thessalonica was going through some tough times. When Paul first came to them with the Good News, they lapped it up. The Spirit opened their hearts and their minds, and they eagerly welcomed Jesus as Lord. But in no time, they ran into opposition, opposition that turned violent. It got so bad that Paul had to hightail it out of there under the cover of darkness.

Since that night, Paul had been praying for them and worrying about them, the way a father does, the way a pastor does. He kept looking for some direct news from Thessalonica. I picture him like the father of the Prodigal Son, scanning the horizon every day, hoping for news.

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Finally, Paul couldn't take it anymore. So he sent Timothy to find out what was going on. And when Timothy came back, he had a glowing report about the church in Thessalonica. Their work was faithful. Their deeds were loving. And their hope was enduring. In other words, they were hanging in there, hanging in there with Jesus.

Things were tough. But, as John would write in his first letter, "the one who [was] in [them] is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Paul heard the news from Timothy, and we can imagine how his spirits soared. I'm sure he could have no greater joy.

BUT HERE'S SOMETHING ELSE. The news was spreading. Word was getting out about what kind of people those Christians in Thessalonica were. Their faith was genuine. Their hospitality was generous. Their transformation was remarkable. They were living a new way, the way of Jesus, the way of God's Kingdom. And they were putting up with suffering because they had hope, hope that Jesus would come again and put everything right.

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Not that they were perfect. They had their issues. They still had a lot to learn about living faithfully in challenging times. But they were committed to Christ, and Christ was committed to them. And there was no doubt about how things would end up. God would make them holy in every way. God would keep them blameless in body, soul, and spirit. Because God is faithful.

That's how Paul ends the letter. And it shows us where his joy comes from. It shows us where a father's joy and a pastor's joy come from. That joy comes from the faithfulness of God. Because God's faithfulness is something we can count on.

WOULD IT SURPRISE YOU TO KNOW THAT I HAVE GREAT JOY ABOUT YOU? Would it surprise you to know that I love to tell the story about your faith, your hope, your love? I do. Yesterday, I preached at Beckwith Hills CRC in Grand Rapids. My sermon was called *All Heaven Breaks Loose*. Here's some of what I told them yesterday.

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I said all heaven is breaking loose behind the walls of prison after prison. And light is shining in the darkness. Because Jesus has come. And he is setting prisoners free! They might still be behind bars. But Jesus is setting them free from condemnation, setting them free from judgment, setting them free from selfishness, setting them free from despair.

All heaven is breaking loose. And Jesus is building his church. It's a church filled with prisoners, a church filled with sinners. And what beautiful sinners they are! "Beautiful sinners." That's sounds like an exaggeration, or even a lie. But it's true. Because I'm talking about sinners who are being transformed. I'm talking about sinners who are being renewed in the image of God. Because the Spirit is upon them.

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It's new creation in Christ. That's what's going on. The old has gone, the new is here! No wonder even hardened criminals have gone soft. No wonder they cry from pain. No wonder they cry for joy. No wonder they are in love with Jesus.

LISTEN TO DIETRICH BONHOEFFER. He said, "God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are; not an ideal world, but the real world. What we find repulsive in their opposition to God, what we shrink back from with pain and hostility, namely, real human beings, the real world, this is for God the ground of unfathomable love."

And in the prison church, the results of God's unfathomable love are showing up all over the place. Convicted felons are improvising soul-stirring music and writing passion plays. They are forming Bible-listening groups for the sake of prisoners who can't read well. They are publishing deeply-thought internet blogs that connect the dark realities of prison with the light of the Gospel. They are praying for wardens and for prison guards.

It's the unexpected and beautiful outcome of the unfathomable love of God. It's what happens when all heaven breaks loose.

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That's some of what I told the folks at Beckwith Hills yesterday. I said it all with great joy. Because I could have no greater joy than to know that you are following the truth, that you are following Jesus.

ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO, JAN & I MADE A VISIT to the church in Kalamazoo. We were there for a funeral. After the service, we talked with lots of folks over coffee and cake.

Then Mark & Julie came over to the table. They wanted to say hello. They wanted to thank me for how I had counseled them before they got married. They wanted to thank me for being a pastor to them years ago. And they wanted me to meet their children. It was a fine young family. And Mark & Julie were bringing their children up to know the Lord.

The funeral was sad. But suddenly I was filled with joy. I could have no greater joy than to know that Mark and Julie were still following Jesus and that their children were following with them.

I KNOW A LOT YOU WORRY ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN. You want them to be healthy. You want them to be safe. You want them to be wise. More than anything you want them to know the Lord Jesus. So you pray for them constantly, especially when you don't see them very often, or maybe don't see them at all. I know your hearts ache. I know there's a hurt that doesn't go away. But keep on praying. Keep on praying, and don't give up.

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When I was a brand new pastor, serving a church about 3½ hours from here in Canada, I used to visit a widow named Mrs. DeRijk. She had a broken heart. Her son had left the faith, and his two children were growing up two thousand miles away in western Canada, growing up without knowing the Lord Jesus.

Mrs. DeRijk prayed for them constantly. She had started years before, and she never let up. Whenever I visited her, she talked about her grandson and her granddaughter and how her heart ached over them.

I had been hearing this story for a couple of years, when I made a visit to Mrs. De Rijk that I won't forget. She let me in the front door, and she could hardly contain her joy. She had received a letter from her granddaughter. It was like Timothy coming back with news for Paul. The letter said, "Don't worry about us, Oma. Your prayers have been answered. Both of us love Jesus."

For a grandmother, for a father, for a pastor, there could be no greater joy than to hear that your children are following the truth. So keep praying. Like Mrs. DeRijk, keep on praying.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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