

May 18, 2025

John 16:12-22

“The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Deferred gratification” is a concept in sociology that refers to the ability to delay immediate rewards or pleasures in order to achieve long-term goals or benefits. It is a process that involves self-control, patience, and the ability to resist temptation. Qualities that seem to be in short supply.

The concept of “deferred gratification” was popularized by what was known as “the Stanford marshmallow experiment” conducted by a psychologist in the 1960s. In this experiment, young children were given the choice between eating a marshmallow immediately or waiting for a short period of time to receive two marshmallows. The study found that children who were able to delay gratification and wait for the second marshmallow demonstrated higher levels of self-control and went on to achieve greater success in various areas of their lives.

In our gospel lesson our Lord Jesus speaks of a kind of “deferred gratification” when he says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” In every day life it’s a very hard thing to exchange right now for tomorrow or the far away future. But in our text we are talking about an ongoing sorrow that looks forward to a forever joy when you either die and go to heaven, or in the day when our Lord returns. That’s a very big and difficult exchange because we tend to think that we only have one life to live and we better live it to the fullest. Do we really want to miss out on all the good times that everybody else is having?

The people of the Old Testament were asked by the Lord to be different than the sinful nations and to suffer for being different with the promise of a glorious future in heaven. They had a terrible time managing that concept and I think we do too. The people consistently broke faith with the Lord by violating the covenant so that the Lord finally sent Judah and Jerusalem into exile. Their exile serves as a picture of the hell that we deserve when we separate ourselves from God by loving the down here instead of him and his glorious future that he has planned for us.

When the Old Testament people repented of their sins and returned home from their exile they found themselves in a terrible state. As they were rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem they were struggling with sexual sins and powerful and bitter foes who hated them and wanted to them to fail. No doubt there were lots of pleasurable things that they could have been doing but found themselves doing the hard labor of rebuilding Jerusalem, overcoming sin, and facing the unbelieving world. The people started to lose their faith in the Lord. In these struggles and troubles the Lord used Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levite priests to exhort the people to fix their eyes on the forever things above rather than on momentary things below.

We are told that Ezra reads the Book of the Law of Moses in the presence of the men and women and those who could understand from morning until midday. The ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law of Moses and truly wept at what they were hearing. The book of Nehemiah records:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn

or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for **the joy of the Lord is your strength.**” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

What followed for the people of the exile was the celebration of the feast of tabernacles, also known as booths or tents, which is the only feast of the seven where the people were commanded to rejoice before the Lord. Following God’s command, the people constructed tabernacles (booths/tents) with roofs of olive, palm, and myrtle branches. For seven days, the people ate, lived, and slept in these booths so they could look up into the night sky through the branches and think of the presence of the Lord and their hope of one day being with him forever in heaven. Heaven was their home. This feast was the feast of God’s ultimate deliverance from the sorrow of life down here to the paradise that is ours with the Lord forever. So when the people were full of sorrow and misery - rebuilding Jerusalem, struggling with sexual sins and facing powerful and bitter foes who hated them and wanted them to fail - they were exhorted not to grieve. They were told: **The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength!**

In our gospel lesson, Jesus speaks of leaving his disciples for a little while. This he did and we are also touched by this sorrow - this grief - this emotional feeling of Jesus being gone even though we have the gospel and the holy sacraments. This is a lesson that every generation of Christian must learn. Anyone who thinks that coming to faith in Jesus spells the end of sorrow is in for a rude awakening. Our faith in Christ brings with it tensions and pains we didn’t have before. We have a new work to do that uproots everything down here, we now struggle with sinful desires, and we have people who are against us.

Again, in our gospel account Jesus says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice.” When we believe in Jesus, and when that faith in him grows, weeping and lamenting, sorrow and suffering, increases with it. But our Savior goes on to say: “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” Now, please listen closely. We have here a paradox of Scripture where something seems to be contradictory. The joy of Jesus in the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven actually increases our sorrow because we live in a fallen world. However, that same joy of Jesus in the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven strengthens us to overcome the sorrow that believing in Jesus brings.

We could say it in this way: the joy in believing is joy in spite of sorrow. We are assured of victory because the decisive battle has been fought and won on Calvary’s hill and at the empty tomb. Although we are engaged in so much that causes ongoing sorrow, we experience the joy of our Lord as we go about our business as Christian people. Our identity is bound up with him. He suffered our sufferings that our sufferings may not be the final word on our lives. Knowing his love for us at the cross and empty tomb is the joy of the Lord that is our strength. Thus, we commit ourselves and our problems into his hands, not as an escape from living this life, but as the way to truly rise about these earthy cares to keep our eyes fixed on what is to come.

What a strange thing it is for us to consider that this joy in Jesus remains among us in this fallen world, not because we are kept *from* pain and sorrow, but because we are kept *in* pain and sorrow. This is necessary for us to persevere until the end. We keep on holding to the words of Jesus so that our sorrow will turn to forever joy. And by holding on to his promises, the joy of what we have in Jesus today is our strength, as the source of our sorrow tries to rob us of everything that we have. It is no wonder that Jesus uses the example of a pregnant woman in our gospel lesson:

When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

Did you catch those words? "... for joy that a human being has been born into the world." What is it that keeps a woman going during child birth, regardless of the pain, sorrow, and even screams? She already has a heart for her baby. In the middle of so much anguish she keeps on considering the joy that is in her womb and who she will soon be holding in her arms. That joy is her strength.

Like the woman giving birth, the church is giving birth to that which is from her husband and hers. It is a new creation - the coming together of heaven and us. It is the birth of us with God in forever glory and considered a new thing (like a baby). This joy of the Lord is the strength we have to continue to go through what we are going through until, as it says in our epistle lesson: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Indeed! **The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott