**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC May 17, 2015**

***Joy Complete***

**A Sermon Celebrating the Ascension by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**WELCOME**

Good morning and welcome to worship on this Seventh and final Sunday of Easter, the Sunday we celebrate Ascension Day, which was last Thursday, May 14th.

**THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES** Acts 1:1-11

I have been alluding to the Ascension of Jesus this morning, and now I am going to read you the story of his Ascension, which takes place forty days after Easter. The fifth book of the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles, has the most complete telling of the story.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 17:6-19

The Gospel of John does not tell the story of the Ascension, but John does foreshadow the Ascension in one of the Final Discourses or prayers of Jesus following the Last Supper and before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. These discourses or prayers of Jesus are unique to the Gospel of John.

**SERMON**

Today’s Gospel brings us back to Maundy Thursday, and Jesus bidding his disciples farewell, just as he was to do at his Ascension forty-four days later. Jesus knows that his followers will not have an easy time of it, both after Maundy Thursday and later, after he ascends to God.

Jesus prays, “And now I am no longer in the world, but my disciples are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

Our United Church of Christ motto, "That they may all be one," comes from this text, and refers to our denominational desire that all Christians be united as one.

Jesus prays, "And now I am no longer in the world, but my disciples are in the world, and I am coming to you, ... and I speak these things in the world so that my disciples may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

"I speak these things in the world so that my disciples may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Don't these words about joy sound contradictory, at least on first hearing?

Joy in Jesus facing his immanent arrest, trial and crucifixion? Joy in Jesus leaving his disciples at the Ascension?

To understand what Jesus means by “joy made complete in themselves,” we have to focus on the final two words, "in themselves," --- "that my disciples may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Jesus is not talking about happiness. He’s not talking “Happy talk.” Jesus is talking about joy. And Jesus knows what he is talking about.

Joy lives within us. No one can give us joy, and no one can take our joy away from us.

Jesus is praying that his disciples will be strong in their faith, as Jesus is strong in his faith: faith that he is God’s son, bringing to his followers and the world, God’s unconditional love, and enabling them to love others as Jesus loves them.

At one time or another we have probably all sought the perfect person, the person with whom we could live a joyful life, happily ever after. We have sought our second half, our better self, our soul mate.

But such a “perfect person” does not exist, at least not for very long, even in the most loving of relationships. As a matter of fact, a perfect person does not exist outside of ourselves because the possibility and power of living joyfully has its being within us, within our own bodies, hearts, minds and spirits.

The “perfect person” is already within us, awaiting our discovery, and once we discover the perfect person within, we can go about finding another person --- and not a perfect person --- to share our joy, rather than expecting them to deliver joy to us. Joy is our own responsibility --- no one else's.

Jesus wants the joy that he knows in God to be our joy ---- joy within, joy complete, complete in God’s love.

A rich young man comes to Jesus and asks Jesus what he can do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, “Sell what you have. Give the money to the poor. And follow me.”

The rich young man walks away from Jesus sorrowfully, for the young man had great possessions. He did not have great possessions within himself. He had great material possessions outside himself, possessions he must safeguard from thieves --- and from those in need. The rich young man does not know God’s love, yet.

On the other hand, a woman who had been ill for years came up to Jesus in a crowd and touched his garment. She was healed immediately.

The woman had asked Jesus for nothing; she had not even spoken to him, but her faith in Jesus was an instrument of healing. The power of faith dwelled within her. She walked away from Jesus joyfully.

The other night on the news I saw something that amazed me --- a young woman doing a beautiful pole vault, easily clearing the bar, and winning first place.

It wasn't the woman's gender or the beauty of her vault that amazed me.

What amazed me was that she is blind, and that she was competing with sighted athletes.

Now I can't imagine doing a pole vault at all --- let alone being blind and learning how to pole vault at a championship level. What inner resources she must have --- to believe in herself and do something so extraordinary, with grace and a smile.

So we might well ask ourselves, "What is dwelling within me? Is it the love of treasures on earth --- or treasures in heaven?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus goes on to pray: “O Father, I have given my disciples your word, and the *world* has hated them because they do not belong to the world (the Roman and priestly power structure), just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. … Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

Followers of Jesus, then and now are in the world but not of the world. His followers have a higher allegiance, to God, a connection with all of God’s creation, a passion for justice --- and for peace on earth, good will toward all.

Jesus prays that we be protected from the evil one, just as he taught us to pray, “Deliver us from evil.” And our Lord’s Prayer does not stop with that request. We go on to praise God: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”

Our faith that God’s kingdom, power and glory are forever is what delivers us from evil. Our deliverance, like our joy, lies within us.

Jesus knows that our powers lie within, and so he knows that he can leave us and ascend to God on a wing and a prayer, enabling us to go and do likewise, making us his agents, agents of his reconciling love.

Jesus is sanctified. God has made Jesus holy, and Jesus lives out his holiness, with joy, on our behalf.

The Gospel for today ends with these words: “As you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes, I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

Jesus is ours, and we are his, sanctified “on earth, as it is in heaven.”

“Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of Love.” Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

Our Hymn of Response for this morning is a great hymn of the Ascension, “The Head That Once Was Crowned with Thorns.”

**MORNING PRAYER**

This morning’s prayer is a poem by English poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was raised in the high Anglican Church (what we in America call the Episcopal Church), converted to Catholicism and was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1877, the year he wrote “Pied Beauty.” Let us pray:

*Glory be to God for dappled things—*

*For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;*

*For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;*

*Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;*

*Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;*

*And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.*

*All things counter, original, spare, strange;*

*Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)*

*With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;*

*He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:*

*Praise him.*

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