

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**That your joy may be complete: Journeying in and toward balance**

John 15:9-17

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Since this is the last Sunday I will be at Faith Mennonite for some time, Joetta asked if I would be willing to share some reflections on the past months, which have been a very busy and in many ways very challenging season for me. She suggested that I consider tying my reflections in with John 15, which talks about remaining in God's love and loving each other so that our joy may be complete. I have found this theme to be quite a relevant lens for looking back on my recent experiences and for looking forward to the transitions ahead.

This has been a joyful week for me. On Thursday, I turned in the final paper for the last class that I am required to take as a graduate student. Now the only paper that stands between me and the end of the degree that I have been working toward for the past two years is a dissertation. After being in school for 21 years of life (I recently calculated) that is certainly something to celebrate!

It was a beautiful day, so I took a bike ride to Minnehaha falls. It was a good place to sit and write this reflection, and I decided to treat myself to ice cream. As I was sitting with my ice cream cone thinking about what to write, I noticed that the ice cream cone said JOY on it. It was the JOY brand. I had just told Joetta that the title for my reflection would be "That your joy may be complete." So I sat there for most of a sunny afternoon thinking about how it is that we move from the kind of circumstantial joy symbolized in an ice cream cone toward the kind of joy that Jesus is talking about in John 15: complete joy.

I know from the Psalms, and from my life experiences that moments when I feel filled with joy and new songs are not constant. They are often followed by times when I feel far from joy. These are times when I forget God's love, or like the Psalmist, I feel like God has forgotten. My life feels like a constant cycle of orientation, disorientation and reorientation to God's love. In the past year, there have been joyful days – days when I have ridden my bike down the greenway to campus and couldn't help but hum "How can I keep from singing." There have been other days, equally sunny, when I have ridden my bike along the Mississippi river trying to clear my mind from an overwhelming amount of work and uncertainty about whether embarking on this graduate school journey was really a good choice.

As I have reflected on Jesus' words in John 15 over the past week, in light of the ups and downs of the past year and especially the recent busy months as I have finished my coursework and prepared for the research projects I am about to begin this summer, three themes have stood out to me that I would like to share this morning.

Joy is two-fold

The first is the two-fold nature of joy. There was a short piece in the Mennonite this month written by Jason Boone, the coordinating minister for the Peace and Justice Support network, entitled "Breathing the love of Jesus." The article reflects on how our lives are sustained by both inhaling and exhaling the love of Jesus, and how our spiritual lives lose their vibrancy if we cease to fill ourselves with the love, peace and joy of Jesus. Similarly, our lives become stale and unsatisfying if we neglect to share that love, peace and joy with the world around us.

There is a Henry Nouwen quote that has resonated with me recently, and with this idea of two-fold joy. In *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen writes: "When the deepest currents of our life no longer have any influence on the waves at the surface, then our vitality will eventually ebb, and we will end up listless and bored even when we are busy" (p. 47). Over the last two semesters, I think that I experienced the lowest ebb of vitality that I probably have ever experienced. The most frustrating aspect was knowing that in reality, my life was full of many good things – many things that it seemed should leave me feeling full

of gratitude and joy. But joy and gratitude were far from what I was feeling. Instead, I was feeling overwhelmed and doubtful that academic course I had embarked on was a good fit for me, and that I had the motivation and determination to press on.

I was overwhelmed by several challenging features of the graduate school experience that certainly aren't unique to graduate school. The intersection of these factors threatened my joy with a sense of exhaustion, doubt and fear.

I was overwhelmed by busyness – not just the usual kind of busyness to which I am accustomed and perhaps even somewhat addicted, but an extreme busyness that exceeded the threshold of what I could do well. Usually I can find ways to slow down or cut certain activities out, but there have been periods during the past year when it has felt like the only things I could cut out of my life were the kind of things I wanted to keep in to provide a sense of balance.

A conversation that I had with Melissa Hostetler the other day reminded me that the choices we make to try and maintain balance in the midst of extreme busyness have different consequences depending on the work we do. For Melissa, not finishing an electric fence before the end of the work day means that everything you have planted might be consumed by ground hogs by the time you get back to work. The kind of consequences we face for unfinished tasks are quite different. But you can't always stay working until you have finished everything on your list, because there are other important priorities.

Yet lack of balance in our lives can also have consequences for the quality of work we do. I have found that since the nature of much of my work is producing written products with creative energy, I desperately need a balance of activities in my life that energize me for this kind of creative work. Taking a full weekend to participate in the Building a Culture of Peace workshop several weeks ago was a choice I made at a very busy time because I was craving a reminder that the work I do is grounded in my commitment to peace building work, even though the day to day tasks often feel far removed from that. Similar to other experiences I have had at Faith Mennonite Church, like the labor day service last September where we celebrated the works of our hands, the workshop was really helpful in restoring joy in my work. It nurtured the deeper currents in my life and helped bring them back to the surface.

Other aspects of my life in the past year that have been challenging include grieving relationship changes, walking with friends who have experienced tragic losses, facing the ambiguity of the future, and rejection in a competitive academic environment.

I study comparative and international development education. It's a field that does not have a clearly defined profession as the end goal, which sometimes I love (it's flexible and varied) and sometimes find rather anxiety inducing. Many graduates end up pursuing careers in higher education or international relief and development organizations. As I observe people in these fields of work juggling so many commitments, not only do I wonder if I will find a job at all, but I wonder if I am headed in a direction that matches my priorities and will allow for a well-balanced life.

Academia is an environment where you are constantly presenting your work for critique. With regular rounds of competitive funding applications, rejection is commonplace, but doesn't become any more difficult not to take personally. It's difficult to guard yourself against the discouragement that can come from constantly comparing your work with others. The words "*comparison is the thief of joy*" have taken on new meaning for me in the graduate school environment.

All these things threaten to replace joy with anxiety. Additionally, they make it extremely difficult to find time for the very things that can restore a healthy, hopeful balance.

### Through loving, we remain in love

The second message I have gleaned from my reflections is that it is *through* loving that we experience God's love. There are two examples of this I can think of. One is serving as a deacon. It is in this role of supporting Joetta in her pastoral work that I have been able to deepen relationships with others in the congregation, and with the other deacons. This experience, which has been at times very stretching for me, has also been a rich blessing.

Another example is the card writing practice that I find to be a life-giving activity. I love writing and sending mail, and I often take time to engage in this ancient practice. At one point in the semester when I was really struggling with discouragement, I decided to sit down and write cards to some of the key people in my network of supportive relationships. As I wrote encouraging words to others, I was overcome by the awareness of how deeply loved and supported I am by so many people. Again, in seeking to show love I was richly rewarded with a reminder that I am loved.

### Remaining in love means claiming our chosenness and belovedness

Another theme that struck me in reflecting on John 15 is the significance of hearing that we are chosen and appointed. I admit that I often feel uncomfortable with these words. The idea of being chosen has a very exclusionary ring to it – the flipside of some being chosen and included is others being excluded and rejected. Again, Henry Nouwen offers some helpful perspective. He acknowledges that in our culture, to be chosen usually means to be set apart in contrast to others. But in his words, “To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness. It is not a competitive, but a compassionate choice.” He pleads that we not surrender the word chosen because it is so deeply connected to the truth that we are beloved – that God’s love has seen us as precious, infinitely beautiful, and of eternal value. And it is this truth that we must seek to realize, not only as a trite assurance or a lofty idea that keeps us from becoming depressed, but an awareness that flows through our daily existence and becomes enfolded in everything we think, say and do. For Nouwen, this entails a long and painful process of appropriating this message. He calls it incarnation: Love becoming flesh.

Jesus instructs his disciples so that their joy may be complete. He calls for them to remain in God’s love and to follow the command to love each other. He reminds them that they have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit, but that this fruit can only grow from and through love.

These words are a beautiful reminder that our individual lives and our life as a church are sustained through a balance of breathing in and breathing out the love of Jesus. Such harmony is incredibly challenging. I have found that recently, my tendency has not been to withdraw from busyness for prayer or other spiritual practices, but to add social activities because spending most of my time reading and writing feels somewhat isolating. In the absence of taking more time to inhale, I have found that I have less energy to give to others: it has at times been difficult to listen, to enjoy my interactions with others, and to feel like I am good company. Thankfully, others have graciously reminded me that they don’t perceive me to be as out of balance as I perceive myself to be.

I am hopeful that the upcoming season of life, which for me involves spending two months working in East Africa and then moving to Arkansas for five months of dissertation research, will be a time of restoring balance as I step away from the activities and involvements that have been a part of my life for the past two years and set different rhythms. I am also aware that more often than not, life interrupts the rhythms we strive for and leaves us panting and out of breath. Personally, I am working on expecting and accepting that seasons in which it is difficult to live and breathe in love and joy can and will come again. But I am also working on journeying in and toward the kind of balance, guided by the words and model of Jesus, who calls us to remain in our belovedness as we live and love and bear fruit.