

**Complete Joy**  
**Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2**

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, said  
"Christianity is essentially a social religion,  
and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed  
to destroy it."

The First Letter of John bears witness to the social reality of Christian faith.  
The author (or authors)  
are *declaring to others* what they have seen and heard  
concerning the word of life.  
And they are doing so, as they say,  
*so that our joy may be complete.*

Their message is clear: the joy of the Christian life cannot be complete  
unless that life is shared with others.

Or to turn that around and say it positively:  
our joy in Christ can become complete  
only when we extend the word of life to others,  
close, immediate others  
and, indeed, the whole world.

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Just this week,  
I had an experience as a member of the Body of Christ  
which was rather the opposite of joy.  
It happened at the Presbytery meeting  
during the discussion of an overture from Cincinnati Presbytery,  
which is to be sent to General Assembly this summer.  
The overture is an attempt to remove some outdated language  
from the church's policy on homosexuality.  
It is not an attempt to change the *policy*, per se,  
but to eliminate statements written some 30 years ago  
that are now not only scientifically inaccurate  
but unnecessarily offensive.  
This is a touchy issue, to be sure;  
and the discussion of our differences on this issue  
rarely results in feelings of great joy, to put it mildly.

But during the discussion,  
a minister of this Presbytery, whose name I don't even remember,  
seemed to speak in direct opposition to the spirit of 1 John.  
He stood up to discuss the question of whether we should  
extend debate on the overture.

He spoke against the overture and against extending debate.  
Now, I'm not in favor unnecessarily long meetings  
any more than the next guy;  
indeed, I voted against extending debate;  
but it was the spirit of this minister's remarks that troubled me.

He said, in what could only be interpreted as a mocking tone of voice,  
"We don't need to extend debate,  
because we have all come to this meeting today  
with our minds made up, and everybody knows it.  
It's not like someone is going to speak so eloquently  
that we are all going to be so inspired  
that we say, 'Oh, I've never thought of that before.  
Now I see!'  
It's not as if any of us are going to have our minds changed  
by this debate."

Now here is a man who is clearly frustrated, exasperated, and fed up,  
with his brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.  
Here is a man who has lost his patience in this matter,  
and who – forgetting the 2000+ year history of Christian church –  
thinks that 30 years is a pretty long time.  
He seemed to be saying,  
if they would just stop trying to change his mind,  
if the minority would just shut up and stop bothering the majority,  
if those who disagree with him would leave him alone  
then he could get on with the real business  
of being the church.

With all due respect to those in the majority who agree with this notion,  
I think it misses entirely the vision of Christian fellowship  
which is set forth in this First Letter of John.  
The words this minister spoke on the floor of Pittsburgh Presbytery  
seemed to contradict the word of life  
as it is expressed in First John.

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What is this word of life?  
It is a word about the eternal life that was first with the Father,  
and then was revealed to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ,  
the Son,  
who was heard with the ears  
and seen with the eyes  
and touched with the hands  
of these witnesses in First John.

The witnesses of First John declare this word about Jesus, they say,  
*so that you also may have fellowship with us,*  
and not just any fellowship, for  
*truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*  
The fellowship begins in the life of the Beloved Trinity,  
in the mutual love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
And as we are drawn into the fellowship of God,  
we are drawn more deeply into fellowship with one another.

"Fellowship" – this is the way we talk about the social reality of Christianity.  
In the Greek, the word is *koinonia*.

Listen to the meanings of this word *koinonia*, fellowship:

"a close, mutual relationship, participation, sharing in,  
partnership, contribution, gift."

That's the noun. The verb form of fellowship *koinoneo*, means  
"to share, to take part in, to participate,  
to contribute, to give a share"

The adjective, *koinonikos*, means "generous, liberal"

Not just generous with money or material things,  
but – more fundamentally – generous in heart;  
having a generous heart or disposition toward others.

It is this notion of having a generous heart toward others,  
a generous or liberal disposition toward others,  
a heart of gratuity toward others,  
that is envisioned in First John by the desire  
*that you may have fellowship with us;*  
*and truly our fellowship is with the Father*  
*and with his Son Jesus Christ.*  
*We are writing these things so that*  
*our joy may be complete.*

The way to *complete joy* is the way of *koinonia*,  
the way of Christian fellowship,  
which is the way of a generous heart toward others.

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But if I want to join in *koinonia* fellowship, where do I begin?  
How does my heart become transformed from a  
fearful, protective, conserving, criticizing, condemning heart  
to a generous, sharing, partnering, contributing, trusting heart?

It seems that first I must find a way to overcome  
my fear of and my anger toward  
those whom I perceive to have injured me,

or to threaten me and my loved ones.  
My fear and anger push against my enemies.  
My fear and anger push against those who threaten me.  
My fear and anger push against those who are different from me.  
My fear and my anger close me off, distance me  
and kill the possibility of a mutual relationship  
of trust and respect and love and *koinonia* fellowship.

Notice I am saying *my* fear, and *my* anger.  
That is because the focus is not on fixing others, but ourselves.  
For *if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves  
and the truth is not in us.*  
But the word of life is this  
*if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just  
will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

This is the word of life.  
This the light of God which calls us out of our darkness.  
We all stand in need of forgiveness,  
and the blood of Jesus is a sign to us that God has forgiven us.  
God has put aside God's righteous anger toward us,  
God has overcome the fear of the pain of broken relationships,  
and has chosen – instead of distancing from us –  
to be with us, in Jesus.

Hear the good news of this season of Resurrection!  
Jesus, whom we killed in fear and anger –  
fear, because he unsettled our ways  
anger, because he revealed our unrighteousness,  
and he *broke laws* to reveal our unrighteousness,  
fear, because his liberality calls us beyond our comfort,  
anger, because he turns us to confront our own woundedness,  
and we don't want to confront our own woundedness –  
Jesus, whom we killed in fear and anger  
has been raised up from death – and has come near  
to be with us in *joyous fellowship* once again.

It has been said that "the resurrection *is* forgiveness:  
not a decree of forgiveness, but the presence of gratuity as a person.  
The simple fact of Jesus' appearance to his disciples...  
was the presence of forgiveness.  
Their sorrow, and guilt, and confusion, could be loosed within them,  
because the focus of their sorrow and guilt and confusion  
had come back from right outside it, and was not affected by it."  
Jesus did not come back reciprocating the wrong done to him.  
Jesus did not come back to play our human game of tit-for-tat.

Jesus did not come back to punish us with condemnation and separation.  
Jesus did not come back to mock us for our unrighteousness!  
That would not have been gratuitous. It would not have been forgiving.<sup>i</sup>

No, Jesus came back for fellowship. Jesus came back to restore *koinonia*.

Jesus came back from the dead  
    seeking a close relationship with us,  
    and restoring us to close mutual relationship with each other.

Jesus came back from the dead  
    to take part in our lives and share with us,  
    so that we could take part in and share with one another.

Jesus came back from the dead to gift us,  
    so that we could become gifts to one another.

This is what we know,  
    what we have seen and heard and touched,  
    concerning the word of life.

This is what we testify to one another and to the world  
by the way we forgive each other,  
and restore fellowship with one another;  
by the way we disagree with one another in love,  
without cutting ourselves off, or closing our ears, or averting our eyes,  
or shutting down our hearts from each other.

With a generous heart,  
Jesus gave his blood to be shed for you and for me and for our sins,  
    *and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Trusting in this word of life,  
    and sharing this word of life with others  
    *is the way to complete joy.*  
    Will you let God complete the joy of your salvation?

Then we will come to know and to testify with the Psalmist

*How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head  
running down upon the face...  
like the dew on the ground...*

*For there – in the fellowship of Christ's gratuity –  
the Lord ordained his blessing,  
life forevermore.*

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1993), p.16