

August 27 – Don't Take Life too Seriously

John 15:9-11

Today we end the series where our cats have been teaching us a little about how to live life and grow in faith. I hope you have been enjoying it. I appreciate the comments I have been receiving from all of you. You have given me a lot of possible future sermon ideas, if I should ever want to continue this series. Some of you have even suggested other animals to preach on, but I think I will draw the line on pigs! Today I want to end with the fact that cats love to play. Even when they are advanced in age they will chase things and generally be silly. Our current cat Koji still will chase a laser light until he is exhausted. Cats teach us to live life to the fullest and to not take things too seriously.

When I was thinking about what cat character symbolizes this trait I immediately thought of Tigger from the Winnie the Pooh stories. Tigger is so full of joy that he is always in a bouncy mood. He can't contain himself, even when he tries, and it often gets him into trouble with rabbit. Everyone enjoys a bouncy Tigger because his joy is so infectious.

The scripture that I shared this morning is part of a longer passage where Jesus talks about how he is the vine and we are the branches. We are told to abide in his love. The reason he wishes us to do this is so that Jesus' joy may be in us and our joy may be full. Even though joy is listed as a Fruit of the Spirit, we do not always seem to nurture it and embrace it when it comes to living and especially in our faith. In fact, faith is often seen as a symbol of seriousness. Many people outside the church believe that you definitely don't have fun or at least much fun, as a Christian.

I have often told this story about a time a bunch of us pastors ended up at a Denny's Restaurant after a meeting. It was late and we decided we wanted a piece of pie and it was the only place open. As we were sitting around, about ten of us, we started sharing stories from our ministry. We got laughing a little loud and the manager came over. He, you could tell, assumed he was dealing with a bunch of slightly drunk business people. He said in his most officious manner, "If you don't settle down I will

have to call the cops!” This caused a peal of laughter as one of our group said, “I can see the headlines now. ‘Methodist Clergy busted at Denny’s.’” The manager looked startled when he realized that we were all ministers. He said, “What’s so funny?” We told him one of our stories and he laughed and pulled up a chair and said, “Do you have others?” He continued to laugh at our tales, gave us a pie to split, on the house, and told a couple of others in the restaurant that if they wanted to move that was okay but to not bother this group. As we left he said, “I didn’t know it was allowed for Christians, especially ministers, to have fun.” We are told one of the Fruits of the Spirit is joy and yet we often pretend that laughter and hilarity is a bad thing.

So one of the things a cat tells us is that decorum is not always a good thing! Even our most regal of feline companions have moments of playfulness. We had a majestic black cat who exuded that royal demeanor. Yet, put ribbon in Jack’s vision and he turned into a kitten. He couldn’t help himself. We need to understand that joy and silliness does a body and soul good. It is why we are told God gifts joy to us.

So, how are you doing? Has the burdens of life crushed the joy out of you? It shouldn’t. Have you bought into that notion that as you mature you are to be serious and sober? Why? Be a cat and enjoy a little playfulness.

From Diana Lusby about Grim, the Cat

I first met a little black cat I called Sweet Pea when “she” was living with other feral cats in Peabody Ravine, behind the office where I work in Port Angeles. This cat was so much smaller than all the others I decided it must be a girl. I fed the cats daily but Sweet Pea would never let me close. Sometime later, a new employee decided they wanted to adopt Sweet Pea. It took us a couple weeks to catch that cat, but finally the cat went home and very quickly settled in. And, it turned out the cat is not feral at all and neither was it a girl. They re-named the cat “Grim” after a Harry Potter character. Grim is so tame that he allows his “parents” to dress him up in costumes. Once in a while I get to cat-sit for Grim and I can hardly believe that this is the same cat that lived in the wild for years. He goes for walks on a leash, likes to roll around in the grass, be held, and generally has come to know a very different, much-loved, life.

What keeps us from letting loose with joy? I believe we are too concerned with what everyone else thinks about us. We want to make a good impression. We want to be seen as responsible. We don't want to be seen as silly. Think about Tigger. Rabbit continually reminds him of how he should behave. Tigger doesn't care. He enjoys his bouncy ways. The one time he promises to quit being bouncy, all the joy in Tigger's life disappears. Finally, even rabbit decides a bouncy Tigger, with all the residual problems, is the best kind of Tigger.

Even though we have talked about cats as seeing themselves as the center of their worlds and fiercely independent, they still are willing to play. They don't pause and think, what will other cats think about us if we chase that string. Life is meant to have moments of playfulness. When this playfulness comes in unexpected ways it is so fun. In my last church the organist was a professor of music at the university. Ed always wore button down shirts, skinny ties and dark colored clothes. His wife Carla was a free spirit so you knew Ed had to have a bit of fun in him. One time we were invited to a mutual friends house to play one of those hosting-a-murder dinners. Each of us was assigned a role to play. Ed was to be the American Tourist. He arrived in a loud print shirt, shorts, and sandals, with a big hat, and sunglasses and a big camera around his neck. The quintessential vision of a tourist. We all cracked up because it was so different from the Ed we knew and all throughout the night he played his part well, demanding things, telling people why where we were wasn't like home and stopping everything so he could take pictures. We came to understand how he and Carla got along so well together. He had a sense of playfulness. I just wish he let it out a little more often.

Joy keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously. Joy keeps us from taking life too seriously. Joy allows us to celebrate life however it comes. I think this is why Paul listed it as a gift of the Spirit. People who can see the humor in life do not let the little things get them down. They also seem to be more appreciative of the little joys of life. They seem to be able to go with the flow. Those who are serious seem to focus on everything that is wrong. They take issue with things, want to correct people, and life and get frustrated when things don't go their way.

So you may not have realized it but I believe joy makes us appreciative of life, of those around us and, I believe, of God. Joy helps us see the big picture. Joy helps us realize that life isn't all about us. And once we get ourselves out of the center we realize that life is good. While rules, decorum, and other's opinions are important they should not dominate us.

So, it is time for you to take another mental self-evaluation. When was the last time anyone told you that you were being just plain silly? If it has been a while perhaps you need to work on things. When was the last time you laughed at yourself, realizing that you were too stuck on what you wanted, and it caused you to become a royal pain to those around you? If you can't see that we all get stuck and act foolishly at times, then perhaps you need to let go of some of your wants and needs. When did you step back last and celebrate that life, just as it is, is good and wonderful? This is something that we should do every day.

In going back to our scripture, Jesus said to "Abide in my love...so your joy may be full." If you are feeling that life is not filled with joy, that life is empty instead of full, turn to Jesus. Let his words of love for you fill you. Remember how much God loves you just the way you are. Let that fill you. As you abide in that love it will become a fountain bubbling up in your life, transforming all the rest of life. You will find joy even in the midst of sorrow, joy even when feeling frustrated by life. You will find joy in all of life because you realize God is with you and that makes life good. Be like a cat and let the joy of living, the joy of playfulness fill you each and every day.