

Complete Joy: Loving Fellowship

1 John 1:1-2:2 (NIV)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete. ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. ¹ My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

The resurrection of our Lord, what happened on that very first Easter Sunday, is such a cause for joy that the believers changed their regular day of worship from Saturday to Sunday in commemoration of the event. Still, 2,000 years later, we are generally still worshiping on Sundays remembering the joy of Easter. In fact, the church year, which we use for our Sunday to Sunday Bible readings, has us celebrate Easter for 50 more days – nearly two months!

It warmed my heart this past Sunday to preach to a church full of people and hear others say how good it was to be back in church for Easter, especially as this time last year it was just my family here recording worship as we were trying to flatten the curve.

Yet, even with the sun shining, even with all the people who came, there was still some darkness on Easter. For some people who came last Sunday, I knew that they did not have their loved ones with them, loved ones who had passed away – some who were celebrating their first Easter without them, others celebrating one more year on top of more years without them. In preparing for Easter, putting together the church calendar, it was a bit of disappointment to make the decision for the well-being of others to still not do things we would normally do on Easter – a hot breakfast, postcards to the community, a kids' craft, maybe an egg hunt.

The darkness for me personally on Easter were the faces that I didn't see. Yes, I am very thankful and so overjoyed at every person who came, but I couldn't help but think of the ones who didn't – people from the community that you invited but didn't know if they would take you up on the invitation or not, the people who had said that they would be here but didn't show, the people that you didn't realistically expect to show up but you had prayed to God for that miracle so that they could be built up, refreshed, and renewed by the Word of God. It was kind of like having that seat at your party with a name tag for someone who really hoped would come but the seat remained empty.

Maybe they had something come up. Maybe they got sick. Maybe they talked themselves out of coming either because it was easier not to come or because they were still wrestling with doing what's best for their health. Maybe they were still nursing a past emotional wound and didn't want to risk being injured again. Whatever the reason, which sometimes you get from people and other times don't, it still brings some darkness on a joyous day when people are missing from your fellowship.

Was there anything else missing from the joy we should have in our fellowship Easter Sunday or this Sunday? Is there other darkness that we are walking in right now? John addressed one darkness that we're always in danger of walking in: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...If we claim we have not sinned, we make [God] out to be a liar and his word is not in us." (verses 8,10) Is this the darkness in our lives, the darkness affecting our joy in fellowship?

We don't claim to be without sin. Nobody's perfect, we all say. So, no, we aren't walking in any darkness then, right? We don't claim to be without sin. But let's keep our focus on this incomplete joy in fellowship. Do we think that any missing joy in fellowship is the other peoples' fault, that they weren't going out of their way to call me, say hi to me, invite me to have lunch with them, get together for a play date, invite me to sit with them in worship in person or online? Do we think that this entity of the church is mainly about me and my needs? Am I inwardly focused – that when I come to church that it's about what I get out of it, or it's about how people treat me, or that it's only about my relationship with Jesus? Is church just me, an individual's experience, or is it a community experience, a communion? Am I neglecting the fellowship of the Church?

There is a joining together, a fellowship, that happens when we have a relationship with God. That's the purpose of John's letter. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." (verses 3-4) John writes to us so that we have complete joy. Part of that complete joy is loving fellowship – fellowship with God and with each other.

This fellowship begins with us as individuals when we were brought to faith in God. It happened when we heard that Jesus Christ "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (chapter 2 verse 2) This phrase "atoning sacrifice" means that Jesus satisfied God's demands of perfection by giving his substitutionary life, by his living and obeying God's commands for us, by him dying on the cross to completely pay our debt of sin, by rising from the dead to show that our sins are completely done away with and nothing more will ever be owed. As we have come to know our sins, how we have been inwardly focused that the church is more about me as an individual experience rather than fellowship, this joining together, and we confessed these sins, God "is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (verse 9) And that's just what he did. God holds no anger over us. We are reconciled to him and have peace with him. God is completely satisfied with us right now. We have fellowship with him – both now and forever in heaven. The darkness scatters, and we have joy in our fellowship with God!

This fellowship was not just the forgiveness of our sins as Christ is our atoning sacrifice, but it's a fellowship of more people, that Jesus gathered people around him. He broke bread with people, prayed with them, worshiped with them. He patterned what our fellowship with each other should look like.

Because we have fellowship with God through Christ our atoning sacrifice, having our sins forgiven and being purified from all unrighteousness, we also have fellowship with all other believers in Christ. We are connected to them because they are connected to Christ. This means that we're connected not just to the people sitting near us today, but the people worshiping with us online, people across state lines, people around the world, even the apostles of old, like John. The Church is not just a bunch of individuals, but it is a group experience, a group endeavor, a fellowship, a common sharing of faith among many different people from different backgrounds and different places and different times. It's like an extended family along with their genealogy.

John wrote this letter to make our joy complete. Part of what makes our joy complete is loving fellowship – fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers. This fellowship goes to make our joy complete because fellowship with God and other believers means that we are never alone, that we never go through the trials and temptations all by ourselves. With God and our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are here to provide support for one another – whether it's financial support, praying for them and with them, sharing with them the comforting and encouraging and sustaining Word of life. To make our joy complete, we can't live our faith just as individuals or in a vacuum, but in this fellowship of believers.

So, how can we make more of this fellowship we have with God and other believers? Part of it is simply being here. If you're okay with being here in person, then be here. Be here as often as you can. Join in the fellowship of Holy Communion and have your fellowship with God and your fellow believers built up that way. Pick a person here today that you're going to talk to, that you're going to share some of your time and your life with. If you are okay getting together with people, break bread with them, have a meal, have a laugh.

But in this day and age, you may not always be physically present. So we have to rethink how we fellowship with believers. Can you make a date to video chat with someone? Can you send a message to people worshiping with you, post a question on your mind, a prayer request, a way that God's Word hits you today? Can you send someone that you haven't seen in a while a text or just give them a phone call?

If loving this fellowship with God and other believers is part of what makes our joy complete, then maybe we have to rethink how we do this fellowship. Let's talk about what we can do to not only maintain the fellowship we have with God and each other, but how we can do more, share more, strengthen this fellowship. Is that an event? Is it something like a couple of families getting together in homes or at parks to share lives and faith? Is that one on one meeting with an elder?

Engaging in this fellowship may take new forms or old forms. It may be different. It might make you feel uncomfortable. But that's when you remember where our fellowship and our joy begin. Our joy and love for fellowship begin with Jesus, our atoning sacrifice who purifies us from all sins, makes us right with God and with one another. As we participate in this fellowship, we go to make our joy complete. To walk in God's light is to embrace and enjoy this fellowship with have with God and with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a fellowship built to last forever in complete joy. Love it. Participate in it. Have that joy. Amen.