

TITLE: "Enjoying God's Hot Chocolate"

TEXT: John 15:1-11 (NT p. 109)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Introduction – disassembled Snowmen

A sign on one of the apartments at Willowbrook Manor reads: "Snowmen fall from heaven disassembled." God provides the raw material, but it takes some work and creativity to make a snowman.

That is also true of joy. In our text, Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." God's joy comes disassembled. God gives us the raw material for joy, but it takes some work, and creativity, to experience that joy. Fortunately, the Lord gives us some very clear instructions to show us HOW to assemble our joy each and every day.

1. God is the Vine-grower

Jesus begins by saying, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower." If you walk down West Lake Road, as I often do, you will see wild grape vines growing up trees and reaching heights of 30 feet. However, in the fall, for all their size, they produce very few grapes and the grapes are small.

A vine-grower, prunes the grape vine so that most of the plant's energy goes into the production of grapes. And if you drive by area vineyards in the early fall, you will see row after row of vines with thick trunks and lots of clusters of large, juicy grapes.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are here on earth to bear fruit. What fruit are we to bear? In Galatians 5:22, 23 we read: "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." God is the Vine-grower who works with each person so that she or he will bear as much of this fruit as possible.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many changes in your life? Well, one of the reasons is found in our text. Jesus says: "[God] removes every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit." If there is something in your life that causes you to be LESS loving, LESS joyful, LESS peaceful, LESS patient, LESS kind, LESS generous, LESS faithful, LESS gentle, and have LESS self-control, then God is going to start cutting that out of your life.

One of my high school friends married a lovely woman. She expected him to change his lifestyle after the wedding, but that was not the case. He spent about 18 hours a day working, hunting or fishing. This of course left little time to spend with his wife. She adapted by developing interests of her own. When their son was born, she had the responsibility of his care most of the time.

A few years ago, I went out fishing with him and discovered that he was so anxious and stressed that he was not actually enjoying the fishing. My take was that God was giving him the opportunity to get more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient and gentle through his relationship with his wife and child, but he was bent on achieving these things through hunting and fishing and, as a result, he was getting less and less satisfaction and more and more stress in his life.

God does not prune us simply because God wants to be in control. God prunes us so that we will have more freedom. God created us and God KNOWS that what will make us happiest, and freest, is the fruit of the Spirit. There's a Christian expression that says, "Let go and let God." When we let go and let God remove the branches that are not bearing fruit in our lives we will start being freer and more joyful.

2. Abiding in Jesus

We can only let go and let God if we learn to ABIDE in Jesus. Jesus says:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

To abide means, literally, to LIVE, with a person. So to abide in Jesus means that you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

My word to you this morning, and throughout the New Year, is to do whatever you have to do to abide in Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

What do you want? What do you want this morning? ...I'm going to give you a minute to think about this.....

Now look at your life and think about all the things you are doing to reach your goal, to experience your dream.....

Now, let those things go. Stop striving, stop worrying, stop being anxious. START working on your relationship with Jesus, start ABIDING in the Lord, and you will find that the Jesus WILL give you the desire of your heart.

A year after we were married, Carol was working as a day care teacher and I was an industrial salesman. The problem was that I really did NOT like my job, although it paid extremely well. As a matter of fact, those who stayed in the business have long since retired very comfortably. But the stress was intense.

Early on in that job, my boss described the pattern of a successful industrial salesman.

In your 30s you get ulcers.

In your 40s you get a divorce.

By 50 you have your first heart attack.

You retire at 55.

Most of my older colleagues followed this pattern pretty closely, except that a few never made it past the heart attack stage.

I did well, but I longed for a job I could enjoy. So, about a year after our marriage, with me working almost all the time, Carol and I prayed and decided that I should leave my sales job. So I did. And, let me tell you, it was scary to suddenly be without income.

We also decided to put the Lord first in our lives. We began praying together regularly. We moved close to our church and started going to services each Sunday. Carol sang in the choir and in another church group. I taught Sunday school, worked with the youth group and became a church trustee.

Things did not turn out great right away. The only job I could find working at a landscaping company for minimum wage. But, after six months, I was hired as a buyer at a manufacturing plant and eventually I managed the purchasing department. After a few years, I left to attend seminary and twenty-seven years later here I am, serving as your pastor. And I love being a pastor.

Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Try it. ABIDE in Jesus. Put the Lord first in your life. Pray. Read the Bible. Come to church. Get involved in the life and work of the church. Start helping other people. Let go of your life and let God take over and see how God will come through for you!

3. Abiding in the love of Jesus

Finally, Jesus says: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." ...What are Jesus' commandments? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

Here abide means to stay or remain in the love of Jesus. Jesus was talking to his disciples and he knew that as long as he was there that they, except for Judas, WOULD stay in his love. But Jesus was worried that the disciples would drift AWAY from his love after he died on the cross. ...STAY in the love of Jesus. REMAIN in the love of Jesus. Don't get distracted by things that are not IN the love of Jesus.

Conclusion - "The Wisdom in Hot Chocolate"

Let me close with a story someone sent me by email just before Christmas. It's called "The Wisdom in Hot Chocolate" (www.kutefun.com – Brenda Carpenter 12/18/09):

A group of college graduates, well established in their careers, were discussing themselves at a class reunion. They decided to visit their old university professor, now retired, who was always an inspiration to them. During their visit, the conversation turned to complaints about stress in their work, lives and relationships.

Offering his guests hot chocolate, the professor went into the kitchen and returned with a large pot of hot chocolate and an assortment of cups. Some were porcelain, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, some exquisite. He invited each to help themselves to the hot chocolate.

When they all had a cup of hot chocolate in hand, the professor shared his thoughts. ..."Notice that all the nice looking, expensive cups were taken, leaving behind the plain and cheap ones. ...While it is normal for you to want only the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and stress.

"The cup you are drinking from adds nothing to the quality of the hot chocolate. In most cases, it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. ...What each of you really wanted was hot chocolate. You did not want the cup, but you consciously went for the best cups. ...And some of you began to eye one another's cups.

"Now friends, please consider this: ...Life is the hot chocolate. ...Your job, money and position in society are the cups. They are just tools to hold and contain life. The cup you have does not define, nor does it change, the quality of the life you are living. ...Some-times, by concentrating only on the cup, we fail to enjoy the hot chocolate God has provided for us.

"Always remember this: God brews the hot chocolate, He does not choose the cup.

Joy is God's hot chocolate. Let the Lord prune away that which is not bearing the fruit of the Spirit in your life. ABIDE in Jesus Christ. Abide in the LOVE of Jesus. And you will enjoy God's hot chocolate now and forever and ever. ...Amen.