*Completing Our Joy*

I John 1:1-2:2

Imprinting is a process when new born animals learn their parents and follow them. So it was one Easter when my parents got each one of us a baby duck. I don’t know what my parents were thinking. One of those baby ducks imprinted with my sister. At first she loved the little duck and it began to follow her everywhere. It learned to go upstairs, downstairs and in and out of rooms. Everywhere my sister went it went. But it only followed her. It probably assumed my sister was its mother. I will not tell you what my sister did when she finally got mad at the little duckling following her everywhere. Let’s just say the last little remaining duck went the way of the others.

The writer of the book of I John reminds the reader of the voice of his Lord while on earth. He has probably seen and heard Jesus. But things have changed. Now the risen Christ is made known to Christians who can no longer see or hear him, yet are becoming imprinted to him. His stamp upon those Christians is becoming evident in the way they walk in his light. And they are becoming more in tune with fellowship with Christ as they seek and learn his ways through the Spirit. They are coming to learn that they cannot heal the rupture between them and God on their own. They are also learning a sort of joy that comes with knowing that communion with God is possible through Christ.

Many new Christians believe that theirs is now a life of joy, troubles have passed and being in Christ must mean living a life of happiness and joy. So they go from conversions in joy and excited about their “new” life. But, when the first signs of trouble come along, their faith is shattered a bit, and they may wonder if their faith is strong enough. Where did the joy of their new found faith go?

The life of faith in Christ is not about living a trouble free life filled with joy. We do not have to go around smiling all the time. We know from experience that as Christians we live just as troubled a life as anyone else. Just because we believe in Christ we are not free from difficulties. Others will impact our lives in disturbing ways, we will make wrong decisions, and we will face struggles no matter how deep or strong our faith. What Christ does for us is to give us strength to get through the trials of life. The joy that is part of the Christians faith is the joy of knowing that someday we will be able to live in joyous communion with our Lord for eternity. Someday our joy will be complete and our troubles will be gone. Any problems or joys we can experience while on this earth can be put in the light of what will happen when this life on earth is over, when we make that final transition to eternal life.

When we are firm about that fact, our attitudes toward our difficulties change. When we do not fear death, we are not afraid to live life. When we know we are already in communion with God through Christ, the troubling parts of our difficulties do not overwhelm us. They may cause us pain and turmoil for a while but we know we are not alone in them. We know that we can turn to God as the source of our strength and perspective. Our problems diminish because we know they cannot overwhelm or destroy us. When we commune with God we are more likely to find solutions that help us climb the hill and look to the other side.

It is like the time I got lost in the woods at Grandma’s house. I knew enough to keep climbing up the hill and sure enough, when I got to the top, I saw the farmhouse and knew the way down. No matter where I came out down the hill I would find the road that led me to my destination.

So when we find ourselves in difficult and troubling situations, we can climb the hill with God and see our way a little clearer. We can move forward with a little more clarity and more likely to find answers that we need for the moment. That is part of the joy we have as we live our lives in God’s shelter and shadow, imprinted to Christ so that our ways will lead us to more hope filled living.

So much in this world can overwhelm us, the middle east, terrorism, the violence in this country, the deaths of friends as we get older, loss of security. So much can get us down and threaten to diminish our hope. But as we grow into Christ, we come to know that God is still in control and we can still do our own work for Christ to make this world better. Nothing is beyond God’s ability to make change.

Clay Lein was an atheist and he let everyone know when he had the chance. He had studied engineering in school and needed proof to believe ANYTHING. Clay had attended Vacation Bible School as a child but as he grew older, he began to lose his need for and his faith in God. “I had a very rational mind,” he said. “things had to be logical. I needed proof. There had to be evidence. And if there wasn’t proof then it was just something people made up. Part of the training for engineers is to be skeptical, to demand data, to want to see evidence.”

Clay got married, earned an MBA and began a successful career at Intel. All of these achievements and the world that surrounded him seemed very concrete and observable. There was no need to believe in something intangible that required you to suspend your scientific mind, he reasoned. “Why would I need God? I mean, if he even existed why would I have any need for him?” he thought.

But his wife pleaded with him to attend church, and he acquiesced because he thought “church was a place nice people go.” All the while he tactfully but firmly let people know he was an atheist. Then he volunteered at a youth camp and that’s when his skepticism got shattered. He was asked to pray publicly. Clay was put on the spot without any preparation and he got nervous. But he quickly figured he could keep up appearances by drawing on his childhood memories from Vacation Bible School. He quickly convinced himself he could fake his way through.

But as he began to pray, something very unusual happened. Words oddly began to flow naturally from his mouth, without him needing to conjure up any memories whatsoever. The Holy Spirit took over and directed his prayer for each child! By the time he was done, a simple prayer had extended to 15 minutes. And it hit the mark. One girl was so deeply moved that she began crying. “In between the sobs she began to share that her uncle was abusing her,” he recalls. “And that she hadn’t been able to share that with anybody else until that moment. That’s when I think something clicked for me.”

Suddenly, “God was relevant and He really wanted to do amazing things in my life.” Clay said, “I became a Christian that day. And I heard a voice. It was like more of a thought that comes up and often times it sounds like Clay’s voice but it was definitely God. And it said, “Try me.”

Clay began thinking about how God had changed that teenager’s life in just 15 minutes. What would happen if he gave God more than 15 minutes? Clay launched into a new path for his life. He enrolled in seminary and was ordained an Episcopalian minister in 1996. He said, “If God can change me, He can change anybody.”

Yes, God can and does change people and circumstances through them. That is the joy of living imprinted in Christ while we walk upon this earth, with a far greater joy ahead of us when we finish our walk on this good earth. We are completing our joy as we learn more and more about our creator through Christ.

Some of us seem to have a harder life than others. We all make different choices. But there is one steady constant in this world, the love of God for us. When we live knowing that love, we know we are held in care by the one who created us, we know that through Christ we can walk firmly in the Creators presence and draw from His wisdom and strength. Then nothing can overcome us. The joy that we can know even in the most trying circumstances is the steady knowledge that God is with us giving us what we need to survive. And if we don’t survive, God is still there leading us on to new life when our joy will be complete.

The Christian faith makes it possible to commune with God in a way that makes sense. The path to God has been cleared by Christ. Our sins no longer stand in the way, but often become a talking point with God. The very thing that seemed to keep us away from God now draws us near in more intimate relationship. The things that distance us from God no longer have the power to keep us distanced. We may not be able to see Christ, but we can hear him in our hearts and with his Spirit. We can all be changed, again and again if that’s what it takes until our joy is complete and our knowledge firm that we will live in God’s presence for all eternity. Now that’s called living life to its fullest.