

**“The joy of an obedient spirit” a sermon based on Acts 10:44-48, 1 John 5:1-6 and John 15:9-17 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 6 May 2018.**

I had a minister who crafted memorable sermon titles:

Not every battle is Armageddon – a sermon about not making the penultimate ultimate.

But the topic I remembered for today is “The blessed by-product”, a sermon about joy.

I remembered that topic because of these words:

Jesus said: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

How do we receive this blessed by-product?

The book of Acts gives a hint:

“While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out **even on the Gentiles.**”

Peter began his day believing God was for Jewish Christians only, circumcised believers only.

As Peter spoke, the Spirit came and by the end of his speaking Peter recognised Christ was even for Gentiles, that Christ was for all people.

A complete turnaround, within the scope of a sermon – good news for preachers.

We know there were believers who continued to insist only Jewish Christians could be Christian.

So we have the letter of Galatians, to emphasise the gift of God is for all.

What enabled Peter and the Jewish believers to make that breakthrough to include Gentiles?

I want to use an often unpopular word - obedience.

I use it because of the number of times the word command is used in our readings today.

If you keep my commandments ...

This is my commandment ...

If you do what I command ...

I am giving you these commands ...

When we love God and obey his commandments ...

And his commandments are not burdensome ...

Obedience.

It's so much part of our everyday life we hardly notice – stopping at a red light, keeping to the speed limit, paying tax.

But in certain realms we become nervous of the word “obedience”.

In the realm of religion where people claiming authority have done great harm: Waco Texas, Jonestown.

I imagine we all know people who have claimed authority and abused it.

So perhaps it's understandable why people claim to be their own authority – my opinion is as good as anyone else - no one can tell me what to do.

So it's no to blind obedience.

But what about simple thoughtful obedience?

Most churches try to limit harm.

There are checks and balances: a code of ethics, a book of order, a careful selection of leaders, regular monitoring, thoughtful training, a system of complaint and much more.

Are they fail-proof? Clearly not.

What is crucial is that we are clear about the source and shape of authority.

In the Presbyterian Church we say that the Word of God contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is our supreme rule of faith and life. The Word of God - the living Jesus Christ.

We have subordinate authorities outlining what people believed God said at certain times, and from different times and places and issues they question us and expand our time-limited, space-limited, culture-limited perspectives.

Our worship highlights our authorities.

The burning candle – the living Christ lives among us.

The reading of the Bible - through its strangeness God speaks to us, its stories and images and words shape our life as a community and as individuals.

We set aside ministers to study the Bible, theology and the Christian story who, guided by the Spirit, expound the scriptures.

We set aside people in councils to pray with each other, to listen together to God's word, to discern to what God is calling us together.

We interact with believers in the world-wide church to save us from making ourselves, our group or our congregation or our denomination, the authority.

And so, we audaciously say, that through the church Presbyterian and Anglican and Methodist and universal we can learn the will of God, the way of Jesus Christ, and have company in living it.

There is freedom in this focus.

I remember seeing a picture from Gulliver's travels of Gulliver tied down by many pieces of string strung over his giant body by the tiny people of Lilliput.

The Spirit works to cut free what ties the church down – our background and heritage, our status and sense of importance, our family connections and personal preferences, our generational experiences and perspectives.

They are part of us, but they don't need to tie us down because in the Spirit the church lives by obedience to Christ - a way that is more inviting and spacious and inclusive than what our past prepared us for.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes from a Nazi prison cell about the communion we share with each other—and the temptation to take our life together for granted:

“It is true that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers and sisters is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us ... Therefore, let the one who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his or her heart. Let us thank God on our knees and declare: it is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters.”

Obedience to the way of Jesus Christ brings a focus to all my life.

It opens me to fresh possibilities, to the possibility that within the space of a sermon, my faith could expand to include people I never thought to include, even Gentiles.

And what of joy?

Joy is the by-product of obedience, of trusting God to lead me.

Joy is the by-product of a single minded faithfulness that finds the way of Jesus Christ sufficient.

Joy is the presence of Christ in every moment which, he says, is a fruit of obedience (verse 10 - If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love .... so my joy may be in you).

To what is the Spirit inviting us in relation to obedience?

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