# Keep on Rowing!

Sermon Preached by Chuck Cole at St John’s UMC Staunton, VA 24401

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# John 15:9-17 New International Version

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

Last week we went to Chincoteague Island, Virginia on vacation. Chincoteague Island is famous for wild ponies. One morning we went sea kayaking at one point we rowed a little bit up onto the edge of a marsh and were maybe fifteen feet from two wild ponies. It was awesome. On our way back as we were about to cross the largest stretch of the water that we were on our guide said “this is going to be the hardest part, but you just have to keep rowing and you will get there.” As we were rowing there was a point where on the right there was a wooden pole that stuck up out of the water, I was rowing and rowing and not going anywhere. I momentarily considered the possibility that perhaps the pole was moving because I was exerting way too much effort to be sitting still. Then I paused for a moment and ended up moving in the wrong direction because of the current and the wind. So then I determined to just keep rowing and obviously we made it back to shore. What motivated my continued rowing was the Joy of reaching the shore unaided, without having to be rescued by a motor boat that joy kept me rowing.

I share that story with you because in it I see an analogy for what it is to abide or remain in Christ’s love. I kept rowing because I knew that if I did I would get to the shore it was just a fact. If I kept rowing I would experience the joy set before me. Abiding and remaining in Christ’s love is to keep going in the way of Love that Christ has trod. It is to live purposefully and mindfully of Christ’s love and to keep going on in it obeying his commands. It is to keep rowing knowing that we will reach the joy set before us in Christ, not because of our rowing, but because of his love and grace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To be clear he does not fail to love us if we stop rowing, but we do lose out on joy in Christ, as we stop and are nor remaining in the center of his love.

First step to keeping on rowing is of course to keep the truth of being in Christ’s love before us. That we live in it as his disciples. Keeping us in an awareness of his love.

Sometimes we forget the height and depth of Christ’s love for us. We forget that his love for us is just as real as the air we breathe and just as available to us. We are surrounded by it, we are designed to live in it .

Romans 8 reminds us that we cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing, no circumstance, can separate us from him and his love.

In a few minutes we will receive Holy Communion and be reminded and immersed in his love by Grace. I pray we feel his love for us and our place in it as we receive. His love is not abstract; it is as tangible and as real as the communion elements.

24 “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”1 Peter 2:24 (NIV)

Cannot really be more tangible than that.

Also that we are reminded of the truth that that love was active in him well before the day he died. His love caused him to become a human being, to choose his disciples, to walk with them in the ups and downs of life, to pray for them, to teach them, to eat with them, to forgive them etc. When he left them for a time he told them he would return and he sent the Holy Spirit. He will return because of his love and one day we will eat with him at the wedding feast of the lamb in the New Heavens and New Earth.

We are in his love as truly as he was with the disciples. Because of his promises.

Aware of this truth we are called to keep on rowing. Not to earn his love because we can’t do that, not out of fear that we will lose his love because we cannot do that either, but so that we will experience complete joy or perfect joy in Him. We keep rowing because we know as we do we will get to the joy ahead of us which is perfect joy.

Jesus pushed through his fear his desire to avoid the cross and died on the cross because of the Joy set before him

Hebrews 12:2-3. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The joy set before him was the salvation of individuals and the world in the words of the passage their completed Joy.

He kept paddling because of the joy he knew that would happen when all creation is freed because of the giving of himself. We are called to keep rowing so that our joy in being a part of his accomplishment will be complete.

The Christian life is not the shallow following of traditional patterns but the unexhausted and inexhaustible power for fresh creation.

It is rowing and loving in such a way as to move toward the joy set before you of life and life abundant for you, those you love and the world through Christ. The well rowed Christian life is one of living in the midst of the joy of all God has done for us, does though us and will do for us in Christ. In each and every situation let us look for and to the joy set before us.

One really important part of rowing is that it is not an alone activity. It was really helpful to have that guide to help encourage us in those kayaks but to also know that if there was a need we could be rescued and brought to the joy of the shore.

This is the same in the Christian life. We have the Holy Spirit, we have the community of believers the church and we have individual relationships. Avail yourself of these supports given by grace as you are able.

Our rowing/paddling takes many forms.

Part of it is praise and joy. Our Psalm for today is Psalm 98 and it starts “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things…. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn - shout for joy before the Lord, the King.

Rejoice in the Lord and live with the Joy before you. There is of course the joy of the Resurrection and renewal of all, there is individual joy, but there is also the manifestation of the salvation joy in each circumstance - a redeemed relationship, a smile from a loved one who perhaps has not smiled for a while, a child singing a worship songs, a victory over depression or fear.

Praying before Cross Country Meets, dance recitals, football games, plays performances that God would bless the performer, audience and all involved and glorify himself in the process is rowing. This is a reminder for us that in every moment in everything we do we are in the midst of God’s love.

Maybe it is being an encouragement like the Kayak guide who was watching and encouraging. Maybe it is joining the men’s Bible Study/Support group and encouraging one another in Christ.

Maybe it is grandparents and parents praying for their children and grandchildren to grow and live in faith and hope and persisting in educating them in the things of God and meeting their needs despite pain and heartbreak at times. Rowing for the joy of salvation in the life of your child.

People who struggle with particular sins or challenges and keep paddling, and even when they stop and are pushed back, start paddling again.

Keep the joy in Christ before you. We should ask ourselves what is the joy set before us, and row to that end immersed in his love. The joy set before us is salvation but what are the individual manifestations of the joy before us in different situations, figure that out and row toward them confident and immersed in God’s love in Christ.

Keep on rowing immersed in God’s love in Christ and you will reach the Joy set before you. Amen.