

Cartoon Christianity: Joy

John 15: 9-11

1 Peter 1: 3-9

Psalm 51: 10-12



For the last two weeks, we've been taking a light-hearted look at our walk as Christians. We've done that by looking at these ideas through the lens of cartoons.



Two weeks ago, we looked at the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. We saw they had four very distinct personalities. Each of them were good on their own, but they were only effective when they were together, working as a team.

That reminded us that each of us have our own God-given personalities. While those personalities can lead us toward our own sin, our personalities (and the gifts and talents that come with them) are meant to be used for the Kingdom of God.

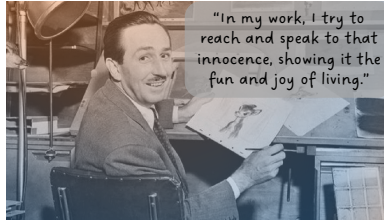


Last week, we talked about imagination. To take a deeper look at imagination, we visited Snoopy and Linus of the Peanuts gang. Linus's imagination gets ahead of him and leads him to disappointment. But Snoopy uses his imagination for big adventures.

We learned our imagination can lead us to disappointment. When we imagine the way our Christian life will be, and when it doesn't work out like we hoped, we might find ourselves in disappointment or even resignation.

But our faith also needs some imagination. We serve a big God who is capable of big things. And if we can't see what God might be doing, we'll miss Him moving in a way we didn't expect.

Today, we ending this series by looking at one more thing cartoons capture so well: joy.



We all know that Walt Disney is one of the greatest minds in the world of cartoons over the last century.

When asked what makes his brand of animation special, Disney once said: “In my work, I try to reach and speak to that innocence, showing it the fun and joy of living.”

Having something that speaks to the joy of living is uncommon.

Cartoons have been around for over 100 years. They have been present through terrible times in history – through wars and scandals, through disease and death. And yet, they have continued to bring joy regardless of what is happening in the world.

Happiness is a common thing. Lots of things make us happy. But joy is different. Joy is long-lasting. Joy is more rare than happiness. True and complete joy – that’s rarer still.

That is what we’re driving at today: the assurance that we have a source of joy that persists through all things.

You would think that we, as Christians, would know this. But yet, we need reminded what it is to be joyful. We need to be reminded *why* we are joyful.

Our Gospel reading today is one occasion when Jesus reminds us what it means to have joy.



Let’s read the words of Christ as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 9-11:

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.

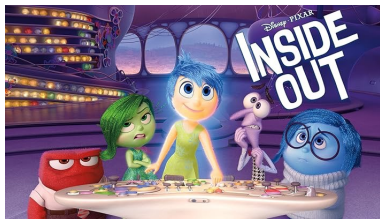


Jesus is explaining what it means to have complete joy. The formula looks simple: know that Jesus loves us, and remain in his love. We do that by keeping his commands. If we can remember that, we have the joy of Jesus Christ in us, and our joy is totally complete.

But we don't always remember that. Even if it sounds simple, it often isn't.

So let's try to simplify it a little bit. And let's do that by looking at our cartoon for today.

Today's cartoon was easy to think of because Joy is the center of attention, primarily because Joy is a main character.



In 2015, Disney and Pixar released the film *Inside Out*. It takes us inside the mind of Riley, an 11-year-old girl from Minnesota.

As the movie starts, we are introduced to Riley's five basic emotions – each of which are their own character. The first of these is Joy, followed by Fear, Disgust, Anger, and Sadness.

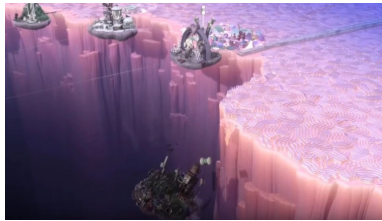
But Joy was there from the beginning, and Joy has been running the show in the command center of Riley's mind for all of her 11 years on this earth. And Riley's life has been good.



But then, Riley's family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco – and her life is turned upside-down. As she navigates this change, parts of her personality begin to change. She's no longer interested in being silly. Her love of things like hockey start to fade.

Joy simply cannot let that happen. As she tries to fix all of these swirling emotions inside Riley, she eventually makes a big mistake and is thrown out of the control center in Riley's mind. Joy is no longer running the show.

The rest of the movie becomes Joy's adventure through Riley's sub conscience. We get to see where Riley dreams, and imagines, and thinks. We get to see things like abstract thought and long-term memory.



One of the things we're introduced to is a place called the Memory Dump. It's a huge, Grand Canyon-like chasm where memories go to be forgotten. Anything that falls into the Memory Dump slowly fades away until it's gone forever.

And of course, through an unfortunate series of circumstances, this is exactly where Joy ends up. Riley finds herself in danger of forgetting what it means to be joyful. One of the most central emotions in Riley's life is in danger of being forgotten at just 11 years old.



At this point, things look hopeless. This move that has rocked Riley's world has made it difficult for Joy to be the center of her life. It certainly appears that Riley will be living a life without Joy.

Our Epistle reading from this morning features Peter writing to a people that may have known what Riley was feeling in this moment.

Peter is writing this letter to Christians who are suffering persecution in Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey. While we don't know exactly what these Christians were going through, we can put together that at the very least, they were being mistreated for doing good.

These Christians that Peter is encouraging are in the middle of an environment where they are at risk of losing their joy. They are trying to walk a good walk, but everything around them wants to rob them of their joy.

I wish I could tell you this morning that when we accept a life as a Christian that we will never be at risk of losing our joy. There will always be temptation, even pressure, to forget what it means to be joyful.

Luckily, there is an answer. It's woven throughout the scripture passages we've read this morning.



But before we get to that, let's revisit *Inside Out* one more time. When we lose our joy, we start to make destructive decisions that are focused inward, focused on ourselves.

Riley is no different. Her Fear and Anger and Disgust convince her that what will fix this whole situation is to leave San Francisco and run away back to Minnesota. So she steals her mother's credit card and she boards a bus out of town.



But Riley has a Joy persists even now. Joy finds her way out of the Memory Dump and back to the command center and figures out what she needs to get back on track. Ironically, what Riley needs is also a little bit of Sadness. But Joy ultimately brings Riley through this trial.

There's a message there for us. Even in times when we are not happy, joy can remain. Joy can still be the main driver in our lives. The only question for us is, where do we find that joy?

Our own joy cannot come from anything or anyone in this world. We can find happiness in those things, but joy is different. If we want joy, if we want that long-lasting state of being, we need an everlasting source.

There's a story of a woman named Janet went to teach English in a school overseas, and she found herself in a joyless atmosphere. People did their jobs, but no one seemed happy. They didn't help or encourage one another.

So it seemed Janet was at a crossroad, and it would have been very easy to lose her joy in the middle of this gloomy and depressing place. After all, when everyone else around you is acting a certain way, it's not easy to do the opposite.

But Janet was still grateful for all that God had done for her, and she expressed it in everything she did. She smiled. She was friendly. She went out of her way to help people. She hummed songs and hymns.

Wouldn't you know it, as Janet shared her joy, the atmosphere at the school changed. One by one people began to smile and offer a helping hand.

Janet's overflowing joy in the Lord persisted through her situation and then it spilled over to those around her.

When a visiting administrator asked the principal why his school was so different, the principal, who was not a believer, responded, "Jesus brings joy."

Peter's letter points the people of Anatolia to their joy. Even though they have never seen Jesus with their own eyes, even though they cannot see him in the middle of their trials, their joy comes in their belief in Christ and the assurance of their salvation.

In Jesus' own words, our complete joy only comes one way: when the joy of Jesus is within us.

In all cases, the answer is the same: Jesus Christ is our only source of everlasting joy.

Jesus Christ, living the way he taught us, faith in the salvation he brought us, that is the way to live with a joy that is truly and perfectly complete.

That doesn't mean our road is always going to be easy. That doesn't mean that we're always happy. Sometimes sadness is a part of the road we walk.

But it does mean that we know we have a joy that will persist. It means that no matter what, we can continue as a joyous people living in the love of Christ.

I can't speak for all of you, but I can say that personally, this promise of complete joy is every reason to remain in Christ's love and to follow him to the very end.



We've been some interesting places these last three weeks.

I don't really expect you to go home today and start watching cartoons with your Bibles open in your lap. In fact, I hope that's not the message you've gotten these last three weeks.

The message I have been trying to convey is that often Christianity seems difficult. And while it's not an easy road, the basic ideas can be rather simple.

Yes, we have our own personalities that can lead us astray. But they are vital and necessary in the Kingdom of God when used correctly.

Yes, we can imagine this life will be carefree and get discouraged when it isn't. But we have the power of imagination and we should use it to think of the wonderful things God has done and can do.

But perhaps the thing we have most of all is joy. We have a full and complete joy because of the love and the salvation we have been assured of. And we have an ever-lasting source of joy in Jesus Christ.

And all of God's people said...