“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” If there was only one sentence in the Declaration of Independence that most of us could quote from memory, this might well be it. It's the part of the Declaration that we as a nation really latch on to and take to heart. The pursuit of happiness. It is a right, we believe, bestowed upon us by God, to be able to go out into the world and get whatever it is that will make us happy. We go in search of a mate, a partner, who will make us happy. We choose a vocation based on whether or not we think we'll be happy doing this job for the foreseeable future. We search for the perfect home to shelter our family and keep us safe and happy. We raise our children with dreams and hopes for their happiness. We envision our retirements in terms of how they will keep us happy into our golden years.

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with pursuing happiness, with wishing it for ourselves, our loved ones, even for those we don't know. The problem is that worldly happiness is just so darn elusive. Mates turn out not to be as perfect as they seemed at first. Or they are close to perfect but then they leave or they die. Jobs can be wonderful and fulfilling and lucrative then a recession comes along and they disappear. Homes can promise comfort and warmth and safety but then turn out to be merely wood and brick and glass that rot and shift and break. Our children can struggle in their pursuit of happiness, finding it finally, then losing it or getting close but never quite reaching happiness' golden ring. We can plan the perfect happy retirement that is quickly shattered by a downturn in the stock market or a spouse's sudden illness.

This world is an amazingly fickle and unpredictable place. Everything we plan so carefully and intentionally for can disappear in the blink of an eye. What we think will bring us happiness can turn out to be just an empty promise that depletes our dreams, our energy or our bank balance. That doesn't stop us from trying harder, from acquiring more, from upgrading to finer and more exquisite, from reaching out to grab the next promise of achievement or contentment. We do it because the media tell us we deserve to be happy, that happiness is just a purchase away. We do it because at any given moment, most of the people around us seems to be happier than we are and we want some of what they have. We do it because we believe God wants us to be happy, wants us to be grateful for the lives we have been given.

But does God really want us to be happy, happy in the way the world defines it? I'm not so sure that's what God wants for us. Jesus didn't talk to his disciples about happiness; rather he talked to them about love. In fact, on the very last night he was to be with them, Jesus talked to his disciples about love. He showed them what love looks like by taking the posture of a servant and washing their feet. Jesus spoke of love even after predicting Judas' betrayal of him and Peter's denial. Jesus asked his disciples not to be troubled that he was leaving them; he told them of the rooms he was preparing for them in God's eternal house. In the middle of all that was going on around him – men plotting to arrest him, to betray him, to torture and to kill him – Jesus spoke of love, love that would not die with him, but would live in those who loved him, would be fanned by the flames of the Holy Spirit and would be shown in the words and actions of his disciples then and to come. On the very eve of his execution, Jesus talked about love and he talked about joy. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Jesus was going to die the next day, he knew he was going to die, and he was speaking about joy – the joy that filled him at this dark hour and the joy that he was passing along to his disciples.

This is what gave and gives Jesus joy: God loves him and he loves us. He loves us to the very end – to the end of his life and beyond, where his love lives forever. This is where **we** find joy, in a love poured out for us, a love we cannot conjour up or find on our own, a love that costs Jesus everything and us nothing, a love we can't take from someone else or buy with all the money in the world. This love flows into us from Christ like all the nutrients they need to live flow from a vine into its branches, filling the branches with life, giving them all they need to bear beautiful, abundant fruit.

In the end, this life is not about pursuing happiness but being pursued by joy. It's a joy that is rooted in relationship: God's love for Jesus and Jesus' love for us. This joy is not fickle or unpredictable or fleeting. It is solid, rooted in love that will last until the very last person departs this earth and will live forever in the eternal love of Christ. This joy grows and spreads when it pushes back boundaries and is shared with the world.

Jesus told his disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you...You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

God chose us. God loves us. God plans to use us to make the world a better place. It's simple. It's true. It's where joy begins. It's where joy begins to be shared. Love one another as I have loved you. I see examples of God's love being shared just about every day and they bring me hope that this world is being transformed by that love. Last week I joined millions across our country watching the city of Baltimore burn with anger over the death of a young black man in the custody of police. In the midst of viral looting and violence, people of God spoke up with words of calm and peace. Pastors took to the streets and linked arms with civic leaders and police, even with known gang leaders to push back angry rioters and protect people who lived in the hardest-hit neighborhoods. Churches opened their doors to nonviolent young black men and provided them a space to hang out and receive counseling from local mental health professionals. The voice of one pastor seemed especially strong and poignant to me. Heber Brown, pastor of Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, said, “Our best sermon right now is not what we say but what we do.” Love one another as I have loved you.

This past week in Charlotte, a church received an envelope with this note on the front, “Please don't be mad. I don't have much. I'm homeless. God bless.” Inside the envelope was 18 cents: one dime, one nickel and three pennies. Rather than being mad, the members of the church were touched by what may be a gift of all that person has to give and are trying to find him or her to offer help. Love one another as I have loved you.

This past week, I saw the congregation of St. Mark open its doors to area residents who are looking for help with computer skills and for help using computers to find and apply for jobs. I saw two members of Zion plant beautiful pinwheels in the flower garden, pinwheels that catch the attention of passers-by and send a message about creating environments free from abuse for all children. Love one another as I have loved you.

I know these are just a few ways in which God's love is being shared by people far from here and by all of you here today. As you strive to live in God's love, hear this: God loves you. God sent you Jesus to be your friend and to love you. God wants you to make the world a better place. When all those things work together, they produce joy – joy for God and joy for you and me.

The pursuit of happiness? Doesn't even come close.

Amen.

*Easter 6B*

*May 10, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*John 15: 9-17*

Homeless man gives church 18 cents

Baltimore pastors take to streets

Floyd citizens take on child hunger