

Surprised by Joy – Catalyst

Pastor David Woolverton

Good morning, everybody! Grace and peace to you, in the name of God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a joy for me to be with you. If you're visiting with us for the very first time or online for the very first time, my name is David Woolverton, and I am one of the pastors here. It's a joy for me to lift with you the Word of God. And as we do so, would you once again bow your hearts with me in prayer? Gracious Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this day and for the word that you have for us. Lord, open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Teach us, Father, what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this we pray in Jesus' name. And all God's people said, Amen.

I don't know about you, but I don't really like chemistry. Do you like chemistry? When I was in high school, I fell in love with the sciences. In fact, most of you know this from prior messages, I wanted to be a doctor, ever since I was five years old. So, I was always oriented more toward the sciences. The sciences, to me, really focused in on biology, not so much chemistry. When I got to college, the idea of biology excited me. The idea of organic chemistry gave me palpitations and I would sweat knowing that that was coming down the pike. You see, I'm the guy in college, first year, when they gave for the midterms, they gave you a little vial of an unknown and you had to do a number of different experiments on it. And then you had to submit a little 3X5 card that told the professor what was in the vial that you got. This was the test. You learned all of the different tests that you would do on these chemicals to figure out what was in it. And so, for the midterm, this is what you had to do, and you had to turn in your card. And I remember, in that particular class, working very diligently, working and trying to figure out what was in this vial of the unknown. Then the bell rang, signifying the end of class so I had to turn something in. I wrote quickly on my card, and turned it in. What I turned in was a card that said, "Yes, it's unknown. I confirmed four of them." It was not my cup of tea; I was not wired for chemistry. But one thing that I've learned now, as an adult, is that the greater lessons of the sciences come when you take the principles that you learned in science class, and you apply them to the rest of life. Right?

So, there is one particular lesson that I learned very clearly and very early on in chemistry, and that was the lesson of what is known as a catalyst. Catalyst has a very interesting definition, one that's scientific and one that's sociologic. This is the definition, according to Oxford University Press Dictionary. A catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without, itself, undergoing any permanent chemical change. It's also a person or a thing that precipitates an event. So, in chemistry, a catalyst could simply be something like temperature. If you introduce a temperature change, it could evoke a reaction. Are any of you chemists out there? Not one? Wow! See, I see that you love chemistry just like I do. So, a catalyst could simply be something like changing temperature, increasing temperature, and it creates a reaction. Like when you turn on your stove and you're trying to boil water. The change in temperature catalyzes the, don't ask me how, but it does something in the pot and it causes your water molecules to start heating up. That's a catalyst. There are other catalysts that we know of that are way too complicated for me to understand, but catalysts are at work every time you turn your car on. In fact, have you ever heard of a catalytic converter? I'd like to purloin that phrase and use it for evangelism purposes. Get it? Catalytic

converter? Never mind. (Laughter) Nobody appreciates how my humor is a catalyst for so much, not necessarily good reactions, I'm gathering.

The second definition, and there are a lot of examples of individuals who are catalysts that evoke a change in the environment. For example, do you know who this individual is? Tim Berners-Lee. Anybody know who Tim Berners-Lee is? I had to look this up, but Tim Berners-Lee was the individual who is responsible for inaugurating the World Wide Web. What we take for granted right now, on our smartphones and our computers, by accessing the World Wide Web. The WWW got its start by this guy who created a pathway and just needed the right access to other brains in order to make it all work. And so, he is attributed to being the inventor of the World Wide Web, a catalyst that has radically changed the entire world. One man clearly can change the world. So can one woman. Think about it. Do you know who Clara Barton is? Clara Barton is responsible for beginning the Red Cross. And now, years later, who are the frontline individuals in global crises? The Red Cross. One individual can change the world. Well, how about these individuals? On your left is a man historically known as Martin Luther. Martin Luther, one man, was responsible for shifting the entire Christian world when in 1517 he made statements and posted them on the Wittenberg Church door in Germany and began the Protestant Reformation. Did he try to start the Protestant Reformation? No, what he tried to do was to confront a movement of the church that was out of sync with how he heard and understood the scriptures. Right next to him is Martin Luther King, Jr. One man who inaugurated a civil rights movement, the effects of which we are still living in today, and need to be living in today, as we have miles to go before civil rights really become a part of our culture and who we are as a people. These individuals are catalysts.

I have a question, as we look at Philippians today. What is catalyzing your life? What is the catalyst inside of you that's beginning to bubble up something new, causing a reaction in you, a reaction in me, a reaction in us the church? What is it that's catalyzing your life? Hold on to that question very briefly. We have been in a message series in the book of Philippians that we are calling Surprised by Joy. I really believe that as you look at the letter to the Philippians and you delve into the words and the context within which Paul is writing, then we can really appreciate some incredible life shifting, life catalyzing lessons that will propel us not only to be catalyzed by Jesus, but to be catalysts in other people's lives.

Last week, we began looking at some verses of scripture that took us to verse eight in chapter three. Today I want to back up just a little bit to verse seven in chapter three and move a little bit further on. So, I invite you to follow along with me in your Bible or in the pew Bible in front of you or on your Bible app. I am going to put the words on your screen, but it's always good for us to open God's word together and engage it. Maybe take notes or highlight some of the features that you see in God's word. You may just discover that God is speaking to you, hopefully because of what I share, but ultimately, maybe the Holy Spirit is going to teach you something today that has absolutely nothing connected to what I'm saying, but to what God is saying. So, the Apostle Paul, in chapter three of Philippians verse seven, says this, "Yet whatever gains I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." And then he goes on, in verse eight, "More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ, Jesus, my Lord. For His sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ." Last week we referred to trash talkin', and as we learned last week, the Greek word *skoupidia*. Hopefully you've been practicing your pronouncement of that word, *skoupidia*, which literally translates as diplomatically put, crap. Excrement.

This is where I want to pick up. Tuning in to the next phase, starting in verse nine Paul says, "In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." He says, "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. If somehow, I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Anybody who has known me long enough knows that I am a lover of words. So, when I look at these verses, these incredible verses in Paul's letter, first they draw me back to his context. Let's remember, Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. He's an individual who once persecuted the church. Now, he's so sold out to this movement of Jesus that his life has been threatened, literally to the point of death. And now he finds himself in jail, in prison, in chains because of what he believes and because of what he's preaching. But he's proclaiming the good news of Jesus. That good news has so radically transformed him from the inside out that he will risk anything because he counts knowing Jesus as more important than even his own life. He is willing to sacrifice his own rights and privileges, all of the credentials that he once found so important. He's willing to sacrifice it all for the sake of carrying that good news of Jesus to the world. He's not afraid of losing his life. Doesn't mean he's not human. It doesn't mean that he doesn't get anxious. We have clear evidence in the scriptures of his anxiety, but he is so focused, so singularly sold out for the good news that he's willing to walk into death itself for the sake of that gospel. So, when he says certain phrases, there's tremendous weight, tremendous experience behind it. For example, when he says, "I have counted everything as loss that I may gain Christ and be found in Him."

I gave my heart to Jesus as a young child. In fact, I cannot ever remember a time when I did not pray. I remember very vividly as a child, praying. Sometimes it was simply reciting the Lord's Prayer, which we did just moments ago. But often it was just expressing my heartfelt love for Jesus, somebody that I believed in wholeheartedly, even though I wasn't able, at that age, to think in abstract terms. For me, Jesus was real, and I prayed. Maybe you did too? But it wasn't until I was in college during my freshman year, and this kid who was science minded was feeling called, feeling disconnected in life. God was calling me to give more than just my heart to him. He was asking for my life. So, while I was a believer since childhood, I was a follower of Jesus from college on. I gave my heart as a child, but I gave my life as a young adult. Up to that point, in between those two bookend moments, I wouldn't quite say that I was lost but when I gave my life to Jesus, I was found. I was found in Christ. And Paul is reminding us of the difference between what it means to have a sense of life and purpose apart from Christ. That all is nothing compared to what life is like being found in Him, because Jesus himself reshapes your whole agenda, your whole perspective.

Paul goes on in verse ten to say, "I want to know Christ. I want to know Him". Way too many times, especially in our culture today, we are content to know *about* Christ. Many of us know about Jesus. But how many in our culture actually *know* Jesus? There's a difference, there's a clear difference. Knowing about Jesus, we can objectify, and Christianity becomes a religion like every other religion. We can know about Jesus; we can know about His teachings but there's something to be said about *knowing* Jesus, knowing personally, the One for whom this religion was named. Do you know Jesus? Is there a sense that you have that intimate connection with the Lord of Life? Paul is craving that. He says, "I count everything else as loss because I want to know Him." And he says, "I want to know the power of His resurrection." It's a really interesting phrase, and it immediately took me to a place in my mind of, what does that mean? What does that mean to know the power of the resurrection? Paul and others in the New Testament testified to this, as well as the entire book of Acts, but most especially, it draws me to the Gospel of John, specifically, chapters 14-16. Jesus is in the upper room and He's with His disciples and the last hours of His earthly life are spent in an intimate connection with His closest friends. And during this moment, He shares

the fact that He's going to be leaving them, but He's not leaving them alone. He's going to be asking the Father to send the spirit to be inside of them. What does all of that mean when Paul says, "I want to know the power of the resurrection." What every believer in Jesus, those of us who want to know Jesus personally, every believer in Jesus has within sight of themselves now the very power that raised Jesus from the dead. We have the power within us. And you might say, well, Pastor David, wait a minute. How come I don't always feel that power? Or maybe I've never felt that power. Well, maybe it's because we're waiting and needing the catalyst. A catalyst that will change the environment of our lives. But make no mistake, if you have said yes to Jesus, and you've given your heart and your life to Jesus, then residing in you, by promise, is the power that raised Jesus from the grave.

What would that look like if we lived that way? Then Paul says, "I want to know Christ in the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings." The sharing of his sufferings. Let's take it one more step. Becoming like him in his death. Okay, well, time out. Time out, Paul. I'm okay with you knowing Jesus and I'm okay with you knowing and experiencing the power of Jesus resurrection, but this suffering thing? Don't you understand, Paul, that we human beings, we have an aversion to pain? So, I don't get this. You want us to suffer to be like Jesus? See, I think what Paul is talking about, and notice here, Paul, the apostle at the time, Jesus was crucified, he was a Pharisee. He was not a believer in Jesus. He was antagonistic to the movement. If he were there, he would have been cheering. But now, as a follower of Jesus, his whole affect has shifted. What does that do to a person? A catalyzing moment... And what Paul was really wanting to communicate to the Philippians, and to all of us who would read this letter ever since, is that Jesus went to the cross for a purpose. He's saying I want to be as purposeful as Jesus. And if that means suffering and dying, I'm in, because in God's grander design, our God who never wastes a hurt, our God who never wastes anything, has a drive that's purposeful at every event of our suffering, even our death. God redeems, because God himself is a catalyzer. Do you see what he's saying? He's not keeping his focus on what's happening in the here and now, he is looking to the God who's got a plan that is bigger than his life, bigger than his sufferings, bigger than his death, bigger than everything. "Nothing separates us from the love of God", Paul would write in Romans chapter three. Not death, not life, nothing. Paul has that perspective about life, that everything is loss compared to knowing Jesus. And when we know Jesus, when we have Jesus, we have everything we need. It redefines everything.

Reading through those verses again, and I've read them, and I've preached them many times over the years, but reading over these words this time, in this series, has been speaking very boldly into my journey. I invite you into engaging these words in a new way for a new year. So, I invite you into what I'm calling a Prayer Focus for 2023. I invite you to do that individually, for your own journey, but I invite us as a church to do this, to begin to frame our prayer around what Paul prayed. In specific terms, I invite you to pray that you might know Jesus more deeply in 2023. That you would engage Jesus, not just increasing your knowledge *about* Jesus, but I invite you to *know* Jesus. Ask Jesus to come into your heart if you've never done that. Ask Him to come into your life. But if you have asked him to reveal himself more. This is a choice to move toward intimacy in our relationship with Jesus through prayer, through tuning our ears to listening to the voice of the spirit especially in the Scriptures, because God speaks to us in His Word, but listening to the voice of the Spirit, and by intentionally searching for Jesus in the faces of one another. I invite you into that intimate journey of knowing Jesus more deeply. And that means putting aside, counting as loss, the things that we thought were important and allowing the transformative, catalyzing effect of Jesus to work His work in and through us.

Second, my prayer focus is that I may walk in Jesus's power, not just in my own. The power of the resurrection that's inside of me, I want to engage that power. I want to live by His power. I want to live by

His strength. So, what I've already started to do daily is to pray verse one of Psalm 16. Simply put, I love you, Lord, my strength, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my healer, my hope, my stronghold. I am choosing to engage the One who has the power to reframe my life. I invite you to do the same. Why? So that we can become more like Him, more like Jesus. This is a prayer that's asking Jesus to be a catalyst in me, in us, so that we may become catalysts in the lives of others. Whereas one man can create a world wide web and radically change all of history. Where one woman can inaugurate a movement of care and compassion that's the front line of every emergency situation locally, regionally and globally. Where individuals like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. can, as individuals, radically transform the entire culture. God can do amazing things through one person whose heart is sold out for Jesus. Maybe that radical change of the world is from one life that sees Jesus in you? That's what I invite us to do. That's the prayer focus, that's the engagement of knowing Jesus more deeply. And as a church, I challenge us this year to draw near in faith to the only One who can make sense of life.

So, friends, what's catalyzing our life?

Let's pray. Father God, I thank you that you have placed in our lives, in our time, in our day, a fresh revelation of Jesus. For without him, Lord, we are nothing. But with Him, everything else in life pales. Thank you for the gift of Jesus. I want to know Him more deeply. I want us to know Him more deeply, so draw us in to your presence, draw us in to your revelation of yourself. Open our ears to hear the voice of the spirit and help us to see Jesus, and to walk within his power, not just our own so that we, too, can become more like Him. And people will see Jesus in us and be drawn to you as well. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for loving us. We love you. It's in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.