



Rejoice in the Lord
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; October 11, 2026
 Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9
 Founder's Day; Kirkin' of the Tartans

Philippians is one of Paul's most personal letters. He was deeply involved in founding this little community of faith, and the Philippians, in turn, have shared in Paul's ministry from the very beginning, offering him their friendship, their prayers, and their regular financial support. So, when Paul writes to them late in his missionary career—from a prison cell, no less—his letter is filled with affection. He tells them how he remembers them with joy whenever he prays for them. He rejoices that the gospel is being proclaimed. He encourages them to rejoice in one another—and then, almost as if to say that joy does not always need a reason, he writes: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

Yet, woven through this beautiful letter is another reality. The community that is meant to draw us into deeper communion with God and with one another is also a community where tensions arise, relationships become strained, and people sometimes lose their way with each other. Even the church at Philippi is not immune. Near the end of the letter, Paul speaks directly to Euodia (Yoo-OH-dee-uh) and Syntyche (SIN-tih-kee), two women who struggled alongside him in the work of the gospel. Something has come between them, and Paul pleads with them to be reconciled. It's a tender reminder that even communities formed by love can experience division — and that the work of the gospel includes the hard and holy work of finding our way back to one another.¹

If we're honest with ourselves, we must admit that since the birth of the church of Jesus Christ, gathering with others to keep faith alive has come with its challenges. In truth, “church” has never been easy. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, his disciples continue to meet in the temple or in synagogues —until friction with Jewish leaders make it impossible. Then, for over 300 years Christians face ongoing danger of persecution from Roman authorities because Christianity is recognized as a cult rather than a legitimate religion. Then, when the Roman Emperor Constantine names Christianity the religion of the state in 313 CE, things appear to be looking up for the church. But the blessing comes with a curse. Christianity becomes a watered-down religion to whom many are drawn —not because of faith in Jesus —but because they want favor with those in political power. You see, church and state make for dangerous bedfellows. Always have. Always will.

In 1054 CE, because of doctrinal disagreements and political conflicts, the Great Schism creates the two largest denominations in Christianity—the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox faiths. The next major split happens some 500 years later when Martin Luther nails his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg Church, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's intent is not to split the Roman Catholic Church. He wants reform. He wants the blatant abuse of church power to stop. Of course, the Pope and other church leaders have no desire to debate their own folly. Instead, they are determined to continue the sale of indulgences, to continue to take advantage of the poor, to continue to do whatever it takes to maintain power and financial status. But the Reformers— Luther in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, and later, others like John Calvin and then, John Knox in Scotland —they set a fire that cannot be quenched—a fire that will carry Christianity from places like Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to places like the shores of America.

While the Presbyterian Church grows and its members begin to make quite a mark on American history, across the pond Scottish believers fall on hard times. After they are defeated by the English in 1746, the wearing of tartans and kilts is banned as well as traditional bagpipes and music so dear to the Scots—in hopes of subduing the Scottish spirit. But the shrewd Scots refuse

to go quietly into the night. Instead, they learn creative ways to preserve their traditions. For example, according to legend, they hide pieces of tartan under their clothing and bring them to the Kirk (the Gaelic word for church) to be secretly blessed – thus, the “Kirkin’ of the Tartan.” Many years later, the practice comes to United States soil during World War II when the Reverend Peter Marshall, a native of Scotland, recreates the Kirkin’ ceremony at his home church, New York Avenue Presbyterian, in Washington, D.C. Since that time, many Presbyterian churches, as well as other denominations around the country, annually celebrate a Kirkin’ service to express gratitude for being able to worship freely.

There is something deeply human about remembering who we are, especially when circumstances make it difficult to do so. We hold on to the stories, traditions, and relationships that have shaped us—not simply to preserve the past, but to remind ourselves of who we are and whose we are—which brings us back to Paul and the church at Philippi. When Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he is not writing to strangers. He’s writing to people with whom he has shared a history. He knows their joys and their struggles. He remembers the ways they have worked together, worshiped together, and endured difficult things together. And so, as he comes toward the end of his letter, his words are deeply personal: “My brothers and sisters whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”

What a fitting word for us on this Founders’ Day, because every church is more than a building. A church is a story of people—people who have gathered, loved one another, served their community, weathered storms, disagreed and found their way back to one another to carry the faith into another generation. Our story reaches back much farther than the building in which we worship today. In 1788, Adam and Elizabeth Sharkey Peck arrived by flatboat on the Holston River at what would become Mossy Creek. Within a year, Elizabeth, with the help of her children and enslaved people, built a simple log structure for worship called Elizabeth’s Chapel. Although the Pecks were Methodists, people of different Christian traditions were welcomed there. From the very beginning, this was a place where people met to worship God together.

The Presbyterians and Methodists continued worshiping together until October 1867, when the Presbyterian Church at Mossy Creek was formally organized. Two years later, construction began on this church building. But in January 1871, just as the walls were ready for the roof, a violent storm blew them down.

The congregation didn’t give up, though. The 64 members went back to work, made 200,000 bricks, and rebuilt the walls—thicker and stronger than before. By the end of that year, the church stood beneath its roof, and on December 16, 1871, the dedication ceremonies began.

All these years later, Paul’s words still feel especially appropriate: “Stand firm in the Lord.” Not stand still. Not hold on to the past. But stand firm in the faith that has carried generations before

us—and then keep building. Because that’s what our founders did. They built. They welcomed. They persevered. They handed something on to those who came after them. And now, some 155 years later, we have been entrusted with their story.

Today we celebrate the stones that make up the walls around us, this sacred space we know as First Presbyterian Church, Jefferson City. We celebrate the Kirkin’ of the Tartans and honor the Scottish heritage woven into the story of Presbyterianism. And we celebrate our own personal heritage, giving thanks for those who passed down their faith in Jesus so that we might believe. We’re here because someone before us said yes to God. Someone stayed. Someone built. Someone welcomed. Someone handed the faith to us.

Once again, the universal church finds itself at a critical juncture. So do the saints here at 721 Church Street. There are, of course, “experts” who claim to have all the answers for how to grow the church in these hard times—and for only a few thousand dollars, they’ll gladly share their secrets. But I have yet to see the Spirit show much interest in cookie-cutter churches. The Spirit uniquely equips each congregation to bear witness to Christ in its own place and in its own time. Our work is not to become someone else’s church. Our work is to listen, to discern, and to follow where the Spirit is leading us. For ultimately, our work begins—not with asking how we can make the church bigger—but with asking how we can become the people God is calling us to be.

The hard truth is that Christ’s church can only grow outwardly when Christ’s people grow inwardly—growing deeper in love, deeper in faith, deeper in compassion, deeper in our willingness to make room for one another and for the people God is still calling to this place. And if we say yes to God—if we’re faithful—we will become what God says we are: “... a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that [we] may proclaim the excellence of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”ⁱⁱ So, we stand firm. We keep building. We keep welcoming. We keep trusting the Spirit to lead us into whatever comes next. And through it all, we remember Paul’s words—not as a command to pretend that everything is easy, but as an invitation to trust that God is still at work among us: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Evan B. Howard, Commentary in *The Life with God Bible*, NRSV.

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 2:9, NRSVue

Resources: Kirkin’ of the Tartan’s Order of Worship from St. Simon’s and Laurinburg Presbyterian Churches, and Order of Worship from Rev. Jeff Binder at Wordpress.com