

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

If last week's preaching text, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, left us much to imagine as to its historical context, today's text from Paul's Letter to the Philippians is quite the opposite. We have reasonable certainty as to the circumstances surrounding this joyful letter to the Philippians.

Paul had, yet again, been imprisoned because of his testimony of faith, at the time of this letter's writing. Although we are not sure exactly where Paul was imprisoned when he penned the words of his letter to the Philippians, we know that Paul was nevertheless in good spirits as he conversed with them.

We think that Paul had established a congregation among the Philippians during one of his previous evangelical journeys. The texture and tone of his letter to the Philippians suggests that Paul had a special relationship with the Philippians among all the communities that he founded. After reading this letter, it appears as though the Philippians really were the apple of Paul's eyes. It's a love letter, really. A love letter poured from the heart of the imprisoned, and yet rejoicing, Apostle Paul.

Apparently, the Philippians had heard of Paul's imprisonment and were greatly concerned as to his health. Therefore, they sent a man named Epaphroditus to deliver Paul gifts from the Philippians and to make sure he was being treated well. However, Epaphroditus become seriously ill upon his arrival to visit Paul in prison. After a close call, he was brought back to health and then sent back to the Philippians with a letter in his hand, the very letter that you and I are reading today, Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

There is yet another significant contrast between last week's Second Letter to the Corinthians and today's Letter to the Philippians. Last week, we discovered that there is really no singular "theme" to the letter of 2nd Corinthians; the content seems to jump from theme to theme. However, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, on the other hand, does seem to have a singular theme: joy.

In preparation to become an ordained minister in the PC(USA), I had to pass a series of ordination exams. One of these was the biblical content exam which was a series of 100 multiple choice questions. Each question quoted a passage in the bible and you had to select the correct passage reference from the multiple choices. Along the way, you learned a couple “tricks” to help select a passage if you were unsure. For example, if the passage mentioned “unity” or “one” or “all,” it was probably from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. If the passage appeared to be from the gospels and included women, it was more than likely the Gospel of Luke. If the passage referenced Jesus going “immediately” here or “immediately” there, it was probably from the Gospel of Mark. Another example was this: if the passage appeared to be from one of Paul’s letters and contained the word “joy” in it, it was probably a safe bet that it came from Philippians.

Why, you might ask? Well, because the word “joy” - or some form of it - appears 16 times this brief letter. If Paul is at his crankiest in the letter to the Galatians, Paul is at his warmest in his letter to the Philippians.

Paul begins his letter by saying the following in chapter one: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Later on, Paul writes the following: “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ...” It is very clear that the Philippians are very concerned for Paul. They are obsessing, it seems, over his imprisonment. Paul, however, wishes to relieve the Philippians of their anxiety by assuring him that even his imprisonment has, ironically, advanced the cause of the gospel. Paul reminds the Philippians that even his imprisonment can do nothing to quell the power of the gospel.

Despite his imprisonment, Paul tells the Philippians that he is nevertheless continuing to rejoice for God is continuing to use him for God’s purposes. Therefore, Paul encourages the Philippians to continue to “live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

In the first reading that we heard a few minutes ago, chapter 2, verses 1 through 11, Paul encourages the Philippians to be of “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.” It appears that there are several other “minds” in the world that the Philippians are tempted to take on as their own. Instead of taking on the “minds” of others, Paul implores the Philippians to take on the mind of Christ who, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and become obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”

Paul seems to find joy in the identity of Christ - something that we should all take note of. Paul does not boast of his strengths. Instead, Paul boasts of his weakness, for he understands that Christ’s power was in his humility, that his eternal life was found in his criminal death on a cross. Paul rejoices because he knows that Christ is his King, who will not disappoint.

Then, in the second half of today’s first reading, Paul points to the coming realm of God’s kingdom. “Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Here it is crucial that we remember that Paul is writing these joyful words *while trapped in a prison cell!* Paul's persecution, his oppression, his imprisonment, can do *nothing* to wash away the joy he has in Christ! Here, in today's letter perhaps, we find the reason for Paul's sincerity. Only a few years prior, Paul was rejoicing at the imprisonment of *other people* - people *he* was persecuting for being Christians. Now, we see Paul rejoicing *at his own imprisonment!* What a radical change in heart!

Towards the end of Paul's Letter to the Philippians, we come to today's second passage from chapter 4, verses 1 through 9.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

We must remember, you and I, that joy is at the very heart of who we are as God's people. We must heed Paul's call to be a people of joy, who constantly rejoice in the love we have been given to share in Christ Jesus. Now, here it is important for us to be reminded of two things:

First of all, to be a community that rejoices constantly does *not* mean that we are to be a community that is satisfied with "the ways things are." To be a community that rejoices constantly does *not* mean that we should be a community that is blind to the injustices of the world. To be a community that rejoices constantly does *not* give us permission to pretend that there is no reason in this world for righteous anger.

Therefore, secondly, we must remember that "rejoicing" is not just a feeling, a static emotion - rather, rejoicing is an action, a process, a discipline, a journey. To "rejoice" means to act accordingly to that for which you are rejoicing. A true act of rejoicing is one that responds to the joy we have in Christ Jesus. Therefore, someone who rejoices in Christ but ignores the hungry person at their doorstep has not truly received that joy in the first place. The person who rejoices in Christ but pretends that the church has no place in righting the wrongs of the world does not truly understand that joy.

We are to rejoice because Christ has called us to be a loving community of inclusivity and righteousness. Our joy is founded in the fact that we are invited, through no merit of our own, to be a part of this community, this kingdom. Therefore, we rejoice by inviting others to join us in rejoicing! The joy that Paul is speaking of in his letter to the Philippians is *not* an inwardly-focused joy but an outwardly-focused joy - a joy that seeks to invite others to the party.

Therefore, as Paul puts it, we are to be a people who lets our gentleness be known to everyone. We believe that the Lord is near, and therefore, we should act accordingly! We are to make our requests known to God and to let go of our worry for, indeed, we believe that God will have the final word and that that word will be good!

Finally, Paul closes out today's passage by reminding the Philippians (and us!) of the things that joy points to.

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

Simply put, the joy that Paul is speaking of, if properly understood and received, inevitably leads us to be people of truth, honor, justice, and purity. We are to keep our eyes focused on that which builds up instead of tears down. We are to be a joyful community of broken believers who are to constantly think about the things that are worthy of praise. We are to hold one another accountable for the thoughts we have amongst ourselves.

Last week, Michelle Obama reminded us that “when they go low, we go high!” That is what Paul is talking about in today’s passage. The joy that we have found in Christ Jesus is a joy that compels us to be a holy people, a separate people, a people who have been saved and convicted by a narrative of eternal hope and love.

The joy that Paul is speaking of in today’s passage is the joy that, a few weeks ago, brought together a group of white police officers and a group of Black Lives Matter protesters to have a BBQ together.

The joy that Paul is speaking of in today’s passage is the joy that has compelled a young African American man to wear a shirt that says “Free Hugs” and to go around and give a hug to every police officer he can find.

The joy that Paul is speaking of in today’s passage is the joy that has inspired us as a church to take a prophetic stand on the issue of gun violence in this country.

The joy that Paul is speaking of in today’s passage is the joy that has led this congregation to lend \$2,800 to 94 people in 34 countries around the world through KIVA.org *in less than a year!*

Friends, make no mistake about it, the joy of Christ is at work in this congregation. It is not a recent development, really. When this congregation was founded in 1743, it was joy that brought this faith family together. Here we are, 273 years later, and it is that same joy that binds us together in 2016 to continue this ministry of love and reconciliation in Christ’s name.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, make it your mission to spread a little joy in your corner of the world this week. Lord knows we need it. Like the Apostle Paul, you and I might - metaphorically at least - be imprisoned. Perhaps not with iron bars, but with philosophies and practices that are antithetical to God’s kingdom of love and peace. Let us remember that, as broken vessels carrying the light of Christ, we are called to rejoice in the name of Christ, and to place our hopes on the eternal freedom we have in Jesus Christ, who - through his life, death, and resurrection - has *already* secured our salvation.

Now, if *that’s* not a cause for joy, I don’t know what is!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.