

## **Sermon, Proper 23A, October 11, 2020, Jane A. Beebe**

“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.”  
(Philippians 4:4-6)

This passage from Philippians shows Paul at his most pastoral, his most encouraging. He greets the Philippians as brothers and sisters, as beloved. They are his joy, and his crown. The crown in this case is the victory wreath worn by someone who has won a race. Wonderfully we learn some of the names of these disciples that Paul terms his co-workers, literally his “yoke-fellows”: Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement. With my penchant for looking up words I discovered that Syntyche means fortunate, Euodia means prosperous journey or good road, and Clement means merciful. Who wouldn’t rejoice at having such companions? (Note to self: Syntyche would be a wonderful cat name).

Paul tells the Philippians to “stand firm” in the Lord. He uses this same exhortation in several of his other letters: to the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the Thessalonians. This is a particular kind of “standing.” Jesus uses the same word in Mark when he says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:25) In Judaism it is traditional to stand to pray. In parts of our service we also stand to pray together. We may have lost that rhythm on Zoom,

but perhaps in your mind's eye you can remember standing shoulder to shoulder. You too are "yoke-fellows," having taken on Jesus' yoke: the yoke that is "easy," making the burden "light." (Matthew 11:30)

Paul is writing to the Philippians *from prison*. How is it that he can urge this community of believers not only to rejoice, but to rejoice always? There must be something about the joy that Paul feels and wants to share that transcends suffering. The story of Jesus' teaching, healing, and subsequent crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension is often called the passion. God in Jesus did all that he did out of great love, and also experienced all that human beings experience: grief, thirst, abandonment. Paul has immersed himself in this same passion, recognizing that his imprisonment has only served to spread the gospel further. In the first chapter of Philippians Paul speaks of the compassion and longing he feels for this group of disciples. He knows the love he feels for them derives from the spirit of Jesus. He tells them, "For [Jesus] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in [him], but of suffering for him as well..." (Philippians 1:29)

Have you ever experienced joy, even when things are not going well, or you are even in pain? I have a precious memory of my mother's memorial service. She had been a teacher of applied music, and later taught in the social science division of a small college. In the late sixties she had been instrumental in getting the social work program at this college accredited. Several of the first graduates of this

program attended her service. In greeting me afterwards they told me of specific memories they had of her teaching and encouragement. These memories were gifts to me. I had a palpable sense of her presence, as if through me she could impart a final blessing to them, her beloved students. In the midst of my grief I felt joy.

Simply and beautifully, Paul goes on to tell the Philippians—and us—how to continue to stand firm. These are actions and attitudes that may be maintained in the here and now. It is possible because, as Paul assures them, “God is near.” He tells them to, “let your gentleness be known to everyone.” (Philippians 4:5) The nature of this gentleness is as one translator put it: “sweet reasonableness.” It is about forbearance. Some of you who have sung in choirs may know that if you are standing to perform, it is not good to lock your knees. You can fall over, or even faint!

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6) This seems to be the heart of what Paul wants to tell his Philippian flock. Who does he sound like? “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink... Consider the lilies of the field...” (Matthew 6:25) Do not worry. Pray with thanksgiving. This is the essence of the rejoicing Paul speaks of. We can do this day by day, as best we can, being gentle with others and with ourselves. And we do not do this alone.

Recently I saw an article about self-care: how it need not be selfish, or complicated, or expensive. Apparently even simple interactions with strangers can positively affect one's wellbeing—even in introverts. In a conversation with a retired clergy colleague on Zoom, I related how my spirits are often lifted by people I encounter on my walks. The natural beauty surrounding me is also inspiring and healing—I cannot help but smile—or even laugh out loud—when I spy a surfing seal in the ocean! Yet human interaction is great too. I have noticed some of the same older couples walking on the bike path. We recognize each other now, and I look forward to the time we can exchange more than smiles, nods, or brief encouraging words. There is an older gentleman who comes out in his electric wheelchair sometimes who always calls out to me: “You’re going to make it! Keep going!”

Sometimes I know the people I see, and it is like finding a long-lost family member. My conversation partner actually lives in his dream retirement home on the shores of Lake Huron in Michigan. On the Zoom screen I could see into his backyard and the lake beyond. He said he too treasures some of his encounters with masked strangers. In a recent walk, he saw a young woman he said could have been no more than 20 praying the rosary as she followed the shoreline. He said seeing her gave him hope. I gathered from him that there was sweetness and simplicity in her actions: it was “grace-full.” The sight of her was unexpected, yet

reassuring. She probably didn't even realize that she had provided a brief glimmer of the Kingdom to someone else. To me, the prayers of this young woman demonstrated those qualities Paul commends to us to contemplate: they were true, honorable, pure, pleasing, commendable.

Thank God for familiar prayers. We can summon them even when tired or distressed. Their very familiarity can sustain the weight of whatever is in our hearts. We can offer such prayers like stones dropped into a pond. They stretch out into ever-widening ripples, creating new, healing patterns into the fabric of our existence. There is a lovely poem by Elizabeth Drescher that was read to me in a prayer group this week that I think expresses the comfort of such prayers:

“in the new light  
of each day's questions,  
I am never prepared.  
Today, again, I have nothing  
to offer but a handful  
of old prayers, worn down  
by the relentless abrasion  
of doubt, and a fragment  
of dream that plays on in my head  
only half remembered. Still,

the doves coo and circle

through the pines

as they do when I pass

each morning...”

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