



From the Pulpit: July 30, 2023

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Philippians 1:3–10

Joy Anyway, I: Praying with Joy

Today we start a sermon series called Joy Anyway, the kind of joy that arises in the middle of things that are hard and in the middle of things that are beautiful. Joy that accompanies us anyway. It is part inspired by Ross Gay, a poet, and his book “The Book of Delights.” The year that he turning 42, he decided that every day that year he would write about delight and where he found the light. His initial thought was that he might run out of delight in which to write about. He found by day three or four that the churning of delight just multiplied. That he became a vehicle of delight, and delight would appear in his midst. The more he noticed delight, the more he experienced. My hope is that we can find that same thing as we search for joy in the midst of our lives, as we look at joy in Philippians, which we will be doing for the next couple of weeks; that we too might be churning in joy, that joy will overflow in a way that is unexpected, and delightful.

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters...

“I thank my God for every remembrance of you”

In June, we followed the stories of Ruth and Jonah, two short but vivid characters who remind us that God’s tenderness, God’s transforming love is not just for some, but for all.

Ruth: a Moabite, a stranger, a foreigner, is grafted into the long narrative of the history of God’s people, and Jonah, an insider called to preach (against what he might call his better judgment) to the Ninevites, foreigners, outsiders, enemies, and their hearts are changed, they are transformed, renewed, restored.

Now in the last weeks of summer, we turn to the New Testament, specifically the book of Philippians, where the narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection takes center stage, and the first century people left in the wake of Jesus’ life are trying to figure out how to live in response to his message; again a tender, transforming message of love, sacrificial love for the sake of the ones who are the most downhearted, downtrodden, discouraged, and destitute.

Those who drew near to Jesus were so transformed that they were willing to take on infinite risk in order to ensure such deep love might be awakened in and available in and to the world.

The book of Philippians is four chapters long. You can read it in one sitting. It is barely more than 2,000 words long. Paul writes from a first century jail, not unlike Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King did in the 20th century during World War Two and the Civil Rights movement respectively.

Paul had been imprisoned because his faith was seen as a threat to the Roman Empire, for in an era when it is expected to show deference to Caesar by calling him “Lord,” Paul instead called Jesus not just “My Lord” (a personal savior) but “*The Lord*” ubiquitous, omnipresent, pervasive, inescapable, over and above Caesar. He is, no doubt, unsurprised that he’s been jailed.

Paul was once on the other side of things: Persecuting Christians. But things changed for him—you know the old story—Paul had a moment of intense spiritual encounter on the road to Damascus and his heart was open. He understood, in a flash, in a moment, the flourishing of the human spirit that was possible through the sacrificial love of Jesus.

It’s not like that for all of us. For some of us, the feeling of being at home in the story of Jesus takes years, decades. For some of us, we feel grounded spiritually only momentarily, only to go back to feeling untethered again.

But for Paul, this Damascus Road encounter changed everything for him and he went from persecuting Christians to being one of the most sincere, eager, fierce flag bearers for Christ.

Paul felt so sustained, so grounded, so at home in the still yet very new story of Jesus that he was willing to risk everything—life and livelihood—to go up against the powers that be to make space for this love-tinged gospel to flourish.

Now he is in jail. But he is not alone. The church at Philippi has sent money. They have sent fellow advocates. They have supported him in word and deed. And in the meantime, the people of Philippi have had struggles: illness, persecution, internal disagreements.

Paul misses his friends. He writes to advise them. He writes to comfort them. He writes to share his own story. For Paul it has been a time of trouble: in his letter he says he feels “hard pressed,” on the brink of “one

sorrow after another,” persecuted and weeping. He is not sure he will see his friends at Philippi again.

And so we get this letter from Paul to his friends that begins with this tender, effusive salutation *I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

“There is a particular kind of joy that comes when remembering friends who come alongside you in the hardest of times.”

I sense that you feel this way about one another from time to time. *I thank my God for every remembrance of you.* For one, these words “I thank my God for every remembrance”

are written across the front of this Church’s 100th anniversary book published in 1996 by our friend Sally Campbell.

When looking back across the now 130+ years of this place’s history, whether you have been here often or if you are back after a long absence, whether you have been here for a long time or if this is only newly a place that feels like home to you, there is a deep effusive gratitude... “I thank God for every remembrance of you.”

I sense that you have written letters like this before: “I thank my God for every remembrance.” I feel it myself when I remember my roommate from seminary who I lived with for four short months, who is now back home in South Korea—we keep in touch with little notes back and forth, mostly on Facebook these days, sometimes with letters sent through a friend who visits back and forth. The handwritten note is, in my estimation, a testimony to gratitude...a tangible reminder of friends who are far off, and yet who share with you in the treasuring of this life. I sense you have these kinds of long distance friendships too.

I feel it when I think of my friend who I have known since 3rd grade, or since 6th grade. I sense you have a friend who you have long loved, decades now, who means the world to you. Maybe you get to sit next to them at church. Maybe they are hundreds of miles away, and yet you still feel them alongside you. Friendship strong across the distance.

I feel it when I walk through the memorial garden. “I thank my God for every remembrance of you.” Friendships forged over a lifetime, now solidified in eternal rest, side by side. Decades ago, friends bought memorial garden plots side by side, and now, their gratitude for one another ascends to the realm of life beyond life. “I thank my God for every remembrance of you.”

There is a particular kind of joy that comes when remembering friends who come alongside you in the hardest of times. The one who brought dinner after the exhaustion of a hard day, a hard week, a hard season. The one who took care of your child when you could not. The one who sat with you. The one who held your arm as you tried again to get up out of the seat of the car, your body weakened by illness or age. The one who let silence linger. The one who spoke gentleness when the rest of the world had only harsh words. “I thank my God for every remembrance of you.”

There is a particular kind of joy that comes in remembering. A particular kind of joy that comes in praying across the distance when things are immeasurably hard. It is not a fabricated joy, not a counterfeit joy, not a phony joy, artificial and reproduced. No. When things are hard, the remembering is different. The joy is different. It wells up. It is held at the depth of an aquifer. It is joy forged over time. It is rooted in something beyond words. Something sacred. It is a deep joy that lures you toward those you those you love.

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel described a memory of a fellow prisoner trading a ration of bread for materials with which to piece together a makeshift menorah during Hanukkah.

Shocked that the man would trade something so essential to his survival, Wiesel asked him, “Hanukkah in Auschwitz?” And the man replied, “Especially in Auschwitz.” On a day when the lived realities of suffering were beyond reckoning, even there, the rites and rituals of prayer and remembrance were so life-giving, so life-affirming, that one might trade bread for candle wax, food for one candle lit against the darkness.

“What kind of tender-hearted letter must you write to those you love?”

I think of this story when I think of Paul and his remembering. He remembers with joy, especially from prison. He remembers with joy, especially when things are hardest. He remembers with joy, especially when it takes sacrifice, especially when his words of remembrance come with a sorrow-tinged longing for a different way, a more flourishing way, especially when his

prayers might further endanger him.

I don’t know how you are called to live into this kind of deep gratitude, this kind of prayerful joy. Maybe not in the way Paul was—jailed because of his commitment to God’s fierce love. Maybe. Maybe not.

But as Frederick Buechner says, “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Paul found a kind of deep gratitude for those who care and support him—and he spoke that gratitude to them. He prayed for them. Maybe you are called to some kind of public gratitude this week. Maybe you are called to write some kind of tender hearted letter to those you love. Maybe you are called to remind someone that even amid hardship, their friendship and support brings you deep joy. What kind of tender-hearted letter must you write to those you love?

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

—Prayers of the People— Squire Prince

Lord God we rejoice this day for your grace and your mercy. For your love and your presence we lift our voices. For the love gift of your Spirit that is being poured out on all flesh we say hallelujah God! We come before your presence with thanksgiving and we enter your courts with praise. Hallelujah to the King of Kings, hallelujah to the Lamb, hallelujah to the Lord of Lords who is the great I am! We come asking God that in all ways you would guide us into joy, love, hope, and peace. We pray that by your Spirit we would come to know the revelation of our belovedness and the call to exploit and spread that love. We pray that your love would cause us to love across boundaries and divisions. In a world that is so divided and tense, so brutal and angry, filled with pain and strife, we pray that we would tap into your Holy Fount of love and joy. Help us to say like Paul, “I have found to be satisfied in any circumstance.”

Lord, we are a congregation that stand in solidarity with our siblings of humanity, both near and far, who are in situations and circumstances, both of rejoicing and mourning. They are known more to you, than they are to us. Even those under the sound of my voice may silently be going through a situation of loss, grief, or pain. We pray that you would, by your Holy Spirit, speak words of comfort into their soul. At night, go by their bedside reminding them that you are always there, Lord God. There may be those under the sound of my voice facing financial hardship, or struggles in the workplace. We pray that you would open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings upon them in whatever way they need, in such abundance that they would not have room enough to receive it. For those rejoicing over the joys of life, and finding the peace of summer comforting, we pray that you would continue to reveal your loving and compassionate presence to them in mighty ways, that they too may join in in saying “Jesus Christ is Lord”. For our children and our youth, Lord, we say thank you. Bless these little sheep of your flock O God, and guide us, that we may be examples of faith for them. For our leaders and our ministers, we say thank you. Bless them with discernment and wisdom as they open up the word of God before us, exposing your love and passion for us.

Lord, we are a congregation, a people who long to know you more. In all things, in all ways, in all facets, may we grow closer to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. *As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after thee.* You my Lord are our heart's desire and we long to worship. And now we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, Our Father.... Amen.

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