



From the Pulpit: August 13, 2023

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Philippians 2:1-5

Joy Anyway, III: Complete Joy

Katie and I are preaching a six-week series titled “Joy Anyway” in which we use Paul’s letter to the Philippians to explore how joy is possible not only in these perfect summer days we’ve been delighting in, but also in the midst of suffering and hardship. Philippians is a short letter. In fact if we preach 6,1800 word sermons about Philippians, we will have written 5 times more words **about** the text than are in it.

Paul is the very definition of sanguine. Writing from a jail whose location we do not know; he uses the words “joy” or “rejoice” 14 times in this letter to the church at Philippi. Today we will delve deeper into the body of the letter in chapter 2: 1-5, where Paul begins to advise the believers in Philippi, asking them to make his joy complete.

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

In these five verses Paul does three things: he reminds the Philippians of the good work God is doing in their community, he asks them to make his joy complete, then he tells them how to do that.

Paul’s affection for the church at Philippi is clear in his naming of the love, partnership, and sympathy present amongst this congregation. Before asking them to further their good work, Paul reminds them of who they are and the good they’ve done.

“...he [Paul] challenges them to live not as Roman citizens but as citizens of the gospel of Jesus.”

Philippians a medium sized farm town in the province of Macedonia and a retirement destination of sorts in the Roman empire. Those citizens who pledged their allegiance to the emperor received tax breaks and enjoyed a comfortable life. According to the book of Acts, Paul goes to Philippi after he has a vision of a man from Macedonia begging for help. After he arrives Paul goes looking for a place of prayer on the Sabbath. He stumbles upon a group of women near the river. One of the women Lydia is a dealer of purple cloth. After she and her family are baptized Lydia offers Paul a place to stay and likely other financial support.

A short time after the prayer gathering Paul casts a spirit out of an enslaved girl who is telling fortunes. When her owners can no longer exploit the girl’s fortune telling for cash Paul is arrested. Disrupting profit streams has a way of landing folks in hot water then and now. Nevertheless Paul is released from prison after an earthquake.

A few years later we don’t know exactly where or when Paul is imprisoned, and his life is at risk. The church at Philippi seems to be doing fairly well and has given Paul financial support. But there’s some kind of tension amongst the believers in Philippi that Paul seeks to address, possibly between two leaders.

So Paul writes them a friendly letter in which he challenges them to live **not** as Roman citizens but as **citizens of the gospel of Jesus**. Being a full citizen in God's kingdom is good news for women and others who are denied the full rights of Roman citizenship. For those who settled in to enjoy a comfy, tax sheltered retirement a short drive from the coast, Paul's challenge is risky and more costly. Why become a citizen of the gospel when you can spend your leisure years golfing and enjoying brunch?

Paul's request of this faithful, brave church community who risk the safety and security of Roman citizenship to worship Jesus and live a gospel shaped life, is that they "make his joy complete." Like us parents who are tearfully dropping our kids off at college this month, for Paul there is nothing more joyful than seeing those we love find real friends, and put their gifts and passions to work doing good in their corner of the world.

Paul desires this complete joy not just for himself, but for his beloved church at Philippi, and so he offers them a formula for joy: Unity, Humility, and the Mind of Christ. This same recipe points us toward God's word for us today.

Then and now living a gospel shaped life requires a like-minded community of support. Unity is elusive. Today church folks might argue about anything from Jello salad potluck recipes to political leanings. Though conflict is inevitable Paul urges Christian communities to focus on what unites them. I believe Kenilworth Union Church has an advantage because of its founding aspirations. The first church constitution reads, "Recognizing the minor differences which exist among believers as being consistent with Christian integrity, we have united as a church of Jesus Christ upon the great essentials of the Christian faith."

Unity in diversity is difficult; it requires humility, the acceptance of uncertainty, and openness to the perspective of others. Paul says "Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard oth-

ers as better than yourselves." Scholars suggest that this particular piece of advice is directed to the leaders of the church in Philippi because to ask humility of those with less power and privilege would go against the values of the community which seeks to empower those on the edges of the empire.¹

When faith communities fail to put others above, or at least equal to us, people are harmed. The subjugation of women, chattel slavery, and the abuse of Native Americans in boarding schools are examples of the damage theological doctrines that belittle dehumanize can do. Papal decrees from the 15th century allowed for the enslavement of non-Christians and the seizure of lands from indigenous inhabitants of Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas.² Catechisms for enslaved people in the 1800s used Bible passages to stress obedience, humility, suffering, and servitude. Humility is necessary to avoid the mistakes of past religious leaders who have provided justification for oppression and harm.

One commentator said "Paul knows the dark side of life... Writing to his friends from prison, with an uncertain future before him, Paul is living into the moment. Every moment is a gift from God filled with the reality of God all around him. In Christ, energized by the Spirit, we rejoice in that reality. In the presence of Christ (God-with-us), we are free to throw ourselves into the struggles and issues of life with abandon and smile."³

Joy is both tangible and ineffable. You've heard me mention before that Brene Brown researches joy. One of her surprising findings is that joy is not the *cause* of

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¹ Wisdom Commentary 72

² <https://upstanderproject.org/learn/guides-and-resources/first-light/doctrine-of-discovery>

³ Merwyn S. Johnson's essay "Between Text and Sermon: Philippians 4:4-9" from the journal Interpretation, January 1, 2019

our gratitude, but the *result* of it.⁴ If you want to feel more joy, practice gratitude. Write what you are thankful for in a journal. Name three things you appreciate at the end of the day. Talk about the gifts of food, family, and life at the dinner table. You can practice even if you lose your job, didn't make the team, are grieving a lost love, or like Paul are in prison.

One spirituality website defined joy this way: "an essential practice growing out of faith, grace, gratitude, hope, and love. It is the pure and simple delight in being alive. Joy is our elated response to feelings of happiness, experiences of pleasure, and awareness of abundance. It is also the deep satisfaction we know when we are able to serve others and be glad for their good fortune."⁵

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Joy is a practice and a positive emotion like wonder or awe. This summer's Children and Family Ministry newsletter, curated by our wise Children's Minister, Greta Connor, is inspired by Goats and Soda's "Weekly Dose of Wonder." Greta has lifted up many everyday delights: turtles and trees, lullabies and lakes, chicken clucks and children's play. Neuroscientists have learned that emotions are not hard-wired. In fact we have the ability to influence the emotions which arise in our lives. Practicing joy and other positive emotions allows us to choose to feel them more frequently.⁶

As evidence of this I will share that I was having a particularly stressful day while trying to write this sermon about joy. Ironic I know. So I took 30 minutes to walk to the little pond in my neighborhood where I startled a few squeaking frogs and watched a dozen turtles bob their heads in the sparkling water. I named the gifts of God I could see.

⁴ <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/?locale=en>

⁵ <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/17>

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandso-da/2023/04/28/1171721872/the-wonder-of-chickens-and-their-egg-song-made-me-a-better-person-and-parent>

I breathed in the unique scent of the prairie plants in August and chose joy over stress.... Mostly.

Joy requires attentiveness. The fourteen of us who just returned from the Wilderness Trip attended to God's gifts as we backpacked through the pristine and remote paths of Olympic National Park. There were no cell phones, no social media scrolling. With only a satellite phone for emergencies, there was no way to hear what might be going on in the news. Our new youth minister Sarah put it this way "During our week in the wilderness, the confirmation students and I found a new appreciation for our own aliveness...we were left with no option but to pay deep attention to the natural splendor around us and the functioning capacity of our bodies and spirits."⁷

The group I was hiking with noticed tiny river creatures, bugs, and thin water worms. We saw a translucent fungus glowing along the trail. We witnessed a moon so bright it blocked the stars. We laughed over endless games of cards. We [wilderness slide] enjoyed the nightly ritual of choosing which freeze dried meal to eat; in the wilderness a packet of mac and cheese or ramen feels like a Thanksgiving feast. Joy is relational, relying upon us to connect with God and one another. The people we hiked with are people we may not hang out with normally, but we built connections based on trust that we can support one another as a church family.

Joy in a troubled world is an attitude, an emotion, and an act of faith. Paul's exhortation to the church at Philippi assumes two things: that joy can be cultivated and that the source of joy is God. The Greek word translated "complete" means fullness of a particular kind: fullness of the Spirit of God which dwells among us in the gifts of sky and mountain, river and freeze-dried dinners, the tender goodbye at the dorm parking lot.

⁷ <https://kuc.org/blog/deep-called-to-deep-a-reflection-on-the-confirmation-wilderness-trip/>

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Complete joy recognizes that God is ever present and desires flourishing for all people. Paul's is an Easter joy, where the inseparable happiness and sadness of Jesus' life and death meld into deep love and abiding hope that are magnified in community and more powerful than any circumstance we face.

Commentaries Consulted:

Cynthia Campbell, *Philippians*, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2020.

Fred Craddock. *Philippians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985.

Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jaqueline Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

O'day, Gail and Peterson, David, *Theological Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017.

Tamez, Elsa et. al., *Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, Wisdom Commentary*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016.

God, this day we look to the sky and say thank you; we stand by the water and with awe offer silent praise; a melody hums across the Sanctuary and we are filled with gratitude. Let us treasure this day. Let us awaken to the beauty of breath and heartbeat, the simplicity of a place to sleep, the nourishment of a meal, the surprise of a community to surround us. We are not alone. Even when loneliness circles round and the grief is but our own, we are not alone. Allow love to seep in God, form us, shape us, mold us in gratitude and awareness of the internal sacred spark that connects us one to another.

We pray for the people of Hawaii, the whipping wildfires that manufacture grief and char, so very many gone in an instant, every book in the public library a pile of ash, a banyan tree scorched, a symbol of community, history, hope. Make a way out of no way, God. Tend to the broken hearted, give shelter to those made instantly homeless, grant life and tender connection amid what was lost.

We pray for the climate-changed planet, give us clean air, soil restored, weather patterns unadventurous, clean energy pouring from school buses, delivery vans, municipal buildings, and churches. Change our hearts and minds as we write policy and make business decisions that impact not just the microcosm of our realm of responsibility, but those caught unaware when drought, fire, and flood move through with ferocious speed. Change our hearts and minds, turn us around, give us the will and way through.

We pray now for those close to home, those in our families, our neighborhoods, our circles of friends. For the joy and delight of the last weeks of summer, we give you thanks. Watch over those who worry about the school year, teachers, parents, students old and young. Pave the path through these transitions with love and tenderness. We pray for those in our lives who are healing, who approach surgeries, who find themselves in more pain than expected. For those who have moved or are moving. For those who are far from loved ones. For those worried about finances. For those unsure how to approach the impossible situation ahead. Let love shimmer amid the situations of sorrow or distress. Let love shimmer through small gestures and wide generosity undeserved. And let your spirit grow among us, O God, so that we can weather the storm, sing the tender song, have the hard conversation, and with boldness let your love win.

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