



## From the Pulpit: August 27, 2023

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time—A Minute for Wilderness

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Philippians 4:4–9

*Joy Anyway, V: Again we say rejoice*

Today we are going to read from a letter found in the Bible. It is from Paul, a person who traveled to many places to tell people about Jesus and start many churches. Paul was put in jail for his faith.

The letter is addressed to the church in Philippi, which was a town in what is now Greece. But 2,000 years ago, it was part of the Roman Empire. The leaders of the church are in an argument. So Paul writes them a letter reminding them of the good things they have done and telling them how to get along. He also tells them a lot about joy.

In the part of the letter we are reading today Paul says, “Rejoice Again!” Katie and I have been preaching about joy in the midst of hard situations for a few weeks now, so I think we are both a little relieved that today we get to talk about other emotions too. Let’s see what the fourth part of this letter has to say.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious 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.*

There is no scholarly consensus on how many feelings there are. Pixar’s *Inside Out* movie is based on a popular theory that there are a small number of universal emotions, Disgust, Fear, Joy, Sad-

ness, and Anger—Surprise didn’t make the cast. School classrooms might display a chart of 30 or more different feelings. According to *Psychology Today* there may be an infinite number, but “the richness of our emotional experience,” depends upon how many feelings

we can describe for ourselves.<sup>1</sup> At the end of *Inside Out*, Riley’s emotional experience expands when she gets an upgraded console with access to a full range of angry words, every shade of disgust, a multitude of joys, and a hormonal booster button.

Just like in the movie, Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi is about how our wellbeing depends upon joy and sadness being able to coexist. Paul talks about joy 14 times, in the part of the letter I just read he adds

love and peace to the mix, writing what I’m calling the very first Social Emotional Learning Curriculum ever. Paul knew something about what we are still teaching 2,000 years later: a healthy and meaningful life requires managing emotions, achieving goals, showing empathy, developing relationships, and making responsible decisions.<sup>2</sup> This life-long learning happens at home, at school, in our careers, and at church.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smashing-the-brainblocks/202307/how-many-emotions-are-there#:~:text=The%20most%20popular%20idea%20regarding,fear%2C%20sadness%2C%20and%20surprise.>

<sup>2</sup><https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/hot-topics/social-emotional-learning>

In verses 5–7 Paul uses words to make a kind of joy sandwich<sup>3</sup>, where peace and love are the bread, and our experiences are the inside part. Because our lives are each unique, our joy sandwiches are as varied as you would find in any school cafeteria. Some are made with sweet Nutella, others ordinary deli turkey. Others of us open our lunch boxes to find something as unexpected as liverwurst and onions.

Paul's joy sandwich begins with God's love and presence: God's love is bigger than we can imagine and always close to us. Paul says, "The Lord is near." Our beloved chapel prayer says it this way, "we know our God is here... God loves us all the same." Because God loves us, we are able to do what Jesus said was most important: love God and love other people, our neighbors.

It is easy to get distracted from God's love and presence. We have busy schedules, endless to do lists, and tempting screens. You've heard me and the youth talk about the Wilderness Confirmation Trip to Olympic National Park earlier this month. One of the things we did every evening was to ask each other two questions: "Where did you notice God?" and "Where did God notice you?" Those questions are much easier to answer out in the woods away from distractions. God feels near when we are surrounded by mountains and out of cell phone coverage. Most of the time we answered the question, "when did God notice me?" by talking about the strength God gave us in the hard times we had climbing up steep hills or when we were disappointed that parts of the trip didn't go as we planned. God noticed Sarah and me in the 4 a.m. airport departures.

Our group also noticed God in the joyful moments when we traded our food so that everyone had what they liked, when we reached a beautiful view, or played

games at night. God's love makes it possible for joy even during challenging situations.

On the wilderness trip, every time we prayed and learned together, we chose a sticker to put on our water bottles. Today you will get a sticker to place on your water bottle or something else that you take to school often to remind you that God is near. God loves you.

"Paul's joy sandwich begins with God's love and presence: God's love is bigger than we can imagine and always close to us."

Peace is the other piece of bread in the joy sandwich. Peace also comes from God. Both kids and adults get overwhelmed. Peace can be hard to find. Dr. Lisa Damour the psychologist and *New York Times* columnist who was a *FAN* speaker last March, says that our emotional storms are like one of those bottles with glitter and water in them when it's shaken really hard. The first thing we need to do to find peace, Dr. Damour learned from a friend, is to let the glitter settle.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe you have some trusted ways to find calm in the storm. Breathing exercises, mindfulness, and alone time are helpful tools when we feel overwhelmed. Going outside in God's creation is another way that many of us find peace. Remember how it felt this summer when you spent all day outside at camp? Or playing at the park? Or swimming in the lake? Or when you got to take a morning walk with friends? Nature reminds us that God's peace which passes understanding, protects our hearts and minds.

Even though we've been outside a lot this summer, school means many of us are headed indoors. How do we find the peace of nature when we are stuck at our desks? This week I discovered a Caldecott Honor Award picture book titled, *Outside In* by Deborah Underwood which starts,

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<sup>3</sup>My image of the sandwich was inspired by Fred Craddock's discussion of the sentence structure in *Philippians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/well/family/how-to-help-teens-weather-their-emotional-storms.html>

*“Once we were part of Outside and Outside was part of us. There was nothing between us. Now sometimes even when we’re outside, we are inside. We forget that outside is there. So Outside reminds us... Outside sings to us with chirps and rustles and tap-taps on the roof. Outside sneaks inside: a spider seeking shelter, a boxelder bug in the bath, a tiny snail on kale... Outside waits and we answer.”*

Peace is like a sparkling river waiting for us to dip our toes in. We can choose peace any time we want. We can sit and watch a migrating monarch. We can pause to taste the blackberries ripening in the bramble. We can be gladdened by the gladiolas at the grocery, remembering the one our grandmother used to grow. The peace of God’s creation sneaks into our distractedness, just like the little green bug who landed on my screen while I was writing this sermon. We can open ourselves to God’s peace in our daily lives, wherever we are. If our screens are too tempting or calendars too full to notice God, we can let the storm settle and make different choices.

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Sarah, Squire, Katie, Greta, Lisa and I, and this entire congregation want children and youth to know that just like God’s love surrounds us, God’s peace is always with us. Our back-to-school blessing stickers for this year read, “Peace, be upon you.”

In Pauls’ joy sandwich, love and peace and the bread holding everything together. In the middle, Paul says, “do not be anxious about anything. Talk to God about

what you need and what you are thankful for.” This is our part of the joy sandwich, to trust God is near even in the hard stuff and continue to have a conversation with God about what is good and what we need.

Paul knew what it was like when life was really tough. The people at the church he was writing to were having some arguments. So Paul taught them and us how to make joy out of God’s love and God’s peace. We can know joy in **all** things, good and bad.

It’s like at the end of the *Inside Out* movie, when the memory spheres are no longer just one color, but multi-colored. Just like Riley, we can trust that naming our sadness, and **all** our feelings, develops our emotional vocabulary and enriches our experience. Today we rejoice again, giving thanks to God for the gifts of love, peace, and the full spectrum of human emotions.

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

Yours are the cloud and the breeze, yours are the heat and humidity, yours are the sparrow and goldfinch, yours are the shade trees and yours are the houseplants. Yours are the good old dogs who saunter down the block, and yours are the new puppies, all hours, howling and chewing and tumbling across our households. Yours are the children with backpacks full of new school supplies, yours are the dorm rooms filled with the worries and dreams that sit on the sacred boundary between now and then, youth, and adulthood.

Yours are the bodies that ache, yours are the days that feel unbearably long, and the ones that are over in a flash, the joy condensed into one surging afternoon.

Ours is a “chorus of chattering voices” (John O’Donohue), many-voiced, prayers urgently ping heavenward toward some other-where sense of your presence, when even now, you are within, a river of sacred presence, quiet and slow.

Find us Divine Delight. Search us Sacred Longing. Hear us God of Goodness and Mercy. We hold out to you the soreness, tenderness, irritation, discomfort, grief, and worry of this week.

Make way. Heal. Ease.

Let some part of it cease, fade away, retreat, depart. Or in some way, let your presence enter in such that our soul is full and the trouble we carry falls to pieces, collapses under the weight of your glory, if even for a moment. In the same way we hold out to you in equal measure joy, delight, and thanksgiving. For what we might count among the week’s success, for the meal shared, the friendship forged, the hurdle jumped, the challenge met.

Let our gratitude grow, so that the words that fall from us are “thanks and ever-thanks.” Let us hand over every slight and minor joy to you, so that it might, in gratitude, grow, our lives encircled in a throng of delight made possible by our very noticing.

May that same kind of soul-full joy arise even in the hardest places, where fire, drought, flood, or fierce wind endanger, jeopardize, and put at risk the lives of loved ones near and far. Let kindness pave the way. Let compassion and care rise up. In Hawaii where fire burned. In Ukraine and Sudan where war does not cease. In Jacksonville’s Dollar Store parking lot where racial hate had sorrow-filled consequences. Let there be balm. Let there be a community of love. Let there be a way through.

Be with us, O God. Be with us, mend us, hold us, and hear us as we pray: Our Father.... Amen.

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