



## From the Pulpit: August 6, 2023

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Communion—St. Paul AME Church invitation

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Philippians 1:19–26

*Joy Anyway, II: Complicated Joy*

Today we return to *The Book of Philippians* for this morning's summer sermon series on the tender work of noticing joy, even in the hardest of places, noticing joy anyway. In this scripture passage, Paul is wrestling with what it means to live in the hardship of prison, and what his hope is for the future. Here he is articulating a complicated joy.

*Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that, by my presence again with you, your boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.*

“His [Paul's] thoughts made public to the people of Philippi became public in a way that was exponential”

his wife, Joan.<sup>1</sup> After her death Grant spoke into the void that is social media recording his experience. Reel after reel, Instagram video after Instagram video, he made public the kaleidoscope of loss as incomprehensible as it was ordinary.

Grant's following grew as his raw honesty forged a connection for those going through something just as incomprehensible and just as ordinary: life after loss.

Grant's book was called *A Pocketful of Happiness* because shortly before his wife died, she used that turn of phrase to extend him a lifeline “if he could open himself to noticing joy” Joan said “if he could carry around a pocket full of happiness, considering what he's grateful for every single day, then maybe he'd find a way through after she was gone.” Okay she admits it sounds cheesy, like something pulled from the middle of a hallmark card, but for Grant, he has found the sentiment to be true.

Yes some days he feels like he's come undone, falling apart “like a jelly on the pavement,” but he also has good days, amplified by the way the day can shimmer amid the recalibration he endured after Joan's death.

Thank you Richard Grant, for making public your grief, so others might feel less alone, or at least seen in their own grief.

For the Apostle Paul whose words we read in worship today, we understand that his innermost thoughts, his most intimate joy, his most searing grief has become public in a way he might never have imagined: viral videos on TikTok

Most of us go on to live surprisingly quiet lives, our innermost thoughts, our most intimate joy, and most searing grief shared only with a small circle of confidants. But a remarkable few find a more public voice and share. Their worst fears or most detailed tender sorrow spoken aloud to hundreds, thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands.

This month, the Atlantic published a review of actor Richard E. Grant's new book *A Pocketful of Happiness* in which he does just that: reflect on the very public way he mourned

<sup>1</sup>Gilbert, Sophie. “Richard E. Grant's Most Powerful Performance.” *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2023/08/richard-e-grant-a-pocketful-of-happiness-interview/674876/>.

would be entirely unthinkable, let alone moveable type, the printing press, or same day deliveries of a new copy of the Bible straight to your door, with (what?) his words in it?

His thoughts made public to the people of Philippi became public in a way that was exponential... millions of times millions over an incomprehensible period of centuries. I do want to draw a line between Richard E. Grant's public grief, and Paul's letter to the Philippians, because the passage we read today is overrun by the intimacy of the most privileged and confidential musings of the heart—"I am torn in two," he says, "whether by life or death." He questions if he will have enough courage.

He is writing himself into believing that he can and should endure the horror of prison even as he is encouraging others to endure their own struggles.

Paul did not have Instagram reels, but his instinct to share the raw emotion of his inner turmoil is like Grant sharing his worst and best days of grief.

Even before these words of Paul made it out of prison they would have been read by the censor, someone who was trying to ensure that Paul was not committing more crimes against Rome, inciting insurrection, or giving rise to rebellion.

Paul knows that.

He is writing as a prisoner, also knowing that his words could become a spark or fodder for a fire of Roman authoritarian violence to spread through his community of women, orphans, and elders who are themselves, risking more than they should to come visit him in jail to feed him to encourage him.

Paul is writing in a way that is measured. He is not outlining any hardships that prison is placing on him. He does not describe torture, hunger, chains, dark, dark nights, or the screams of others. But you can hear all of that just under the surface as he works out the central question of this portion of his letter: will he die at the hands of the Romans; or will he live and be able to continue his ministry in Philippi?

He wants to be released because he knows, he trusts that there is something life-changing about the mystery of faith in the spiritual presence of Jesus, the anointed One, Jesus, the resurrected One.

God, Paul says is the One who "began a good work in you." That good work is saving lives. The sharing of bread. The mutual care and protection in community. The lifting of one another's burdens. That Paul knows he makes a living difference. He wants to get back to that kind of tangible, life-saving work.

This is not "saving-work" as in "saying the right words at the right time as a means of salvation" kind of 20th century religious salvation. No this is a more literal, God-infused, tangible, bread and butter, shelter and safety, burden-sharing, heartbeat, and breath salvation. This is the kind of salvation you offer to one another when the road is weary, when the grief is heavy, when the situation is unwieldy. This is the kind of salvation that seeks to change the status quo or gathers the momentum to make changes to a world filled with incomprehensible justice. The kind of salvation that would be worth going to prison for.

*"He is writing himself into believing that he can and should endure the horror of prison"*

Dominican Father Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo, better known as "Frei Betto" was arrested and jailed for trying to make changes to a world filled with injustice, buoyed by his faith. When asked how his experience in prison shed light on his understanding of Paul's writing to the Philippians, he said, "The prisoner has no defense against his jailers. He or she is totally vulnerable. It all depends on them. So you dialogue with death in prison. Life is limited, because the body is imprisoned, even while the mind is free." He was in no way surprised that Paul wrestles with the question of if he would live or if he would die, that his theology would be prison-tinged. It is a vulnerable place, where day by day, hour by hour, God's presence is sustenance.

If Paul was writing from a beach vacation in Sicily or Sardinia, the Christian faith sure would sound different. But the Christian faith is, because of Paul's witness, prison-tinged, and how we understand our God is tied up with Paul trying to weave this letter to his friends in Philippi just carefully enough, where they are comforted and lifted up, cared for by Paul's words and encouraged, but where words don't inflame those who have imprisoned him in the first place.

If Paul can thread that needle then maybe there will still be a strong ministry to return to when he gets out of prison, a vibrant, literally life-saving ministry, especially for the marginalized.

Scholar Elsa Tamez, serves as a faculty member of the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica and she makes the argument that Paul's letter from prison is one amid a long line of letters from prison that follow, and in fact "prison letters" are their own genre of writing. The book of Philippians is not love poetry, it's not autobiography, it's not Vacuum Cleaner Instruction Manual...it's a letter from prison, and that's context is important. Paul's prison letter moves us to think of others who wrote of their faith from prison.

- She urges us to think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote from prison as a German pastor and member of the resistance against the dictator Hitler until Bonhoeffer's execution in 1945.
- She persuades us to remember Nelson Mandela wrote from prison as an activist against white colonial apartheid from 1964–1990.
- She pushes us to think of Frei Betto who wrote from prison in Brazil as a Dominican friar who resisted the dictatorship in Brazil from 1969–1973.
- She prods us to think of Karl Gaspar who wrote from prison in the Philippines while serving as a monk of the Order of the Redemptorists, resisting the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos.
- She pushes us to think of Ety Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who wrote from a concentration camp in the German-occupied Netherlands.
- She encourages us to remember Carmina Navia Velasco who wrote about her faith in response to her a twelve-day kidnapping by the Colombian guerrilla force ELN.
- And she asks us to think of Neila Serrano de Barragan wrote from prison in Columbia after paying a ransom to obtain release of her husband kidnapped by a Colombian guerrilla organization.

It is impossible Elsa Tamez suggests, to draw close to Paul's letter from prison without these contemporary voices rising up as well—imagining Paul in that small space, fifty prisoners in a space with only 9 mattresses packed in, without much air, dark, filthy, fear, and sickness and disease abounding—we know such conditions exist even now at this moment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Tamez, Elsa, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Alicia J. Batten, and Claire Miller Colombo. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*. Liturgical Press, 2017.

“For Paul, nothing  
 was as fragile as  
 a sheet of paper,  
 ...nothing was more  
 durable.”

Alfred Alzugarat, author of “Dictatorship and Prison Literature in Uruguay,” studied the undue number of prisoners who wrote about their faith from prison under Uruguay's dictatorship in the 1970s and 80s. “Nothing seems as fragile as a sheet of paper nevertheless nothing is more durable. When writings are an act of resistance, words remain beyond the reach of executioners... in the closed universe of prison, he says, writing had to be reinvented.”<sup>3</sup>

For Paul, nothing was as fragile as a sheet of paper, papyrus probably, and yet for Paul nothing was more durable. He was questioning whether he would live or die at the hands of the Romans. He was questioning what would happen to the ministry for which he was sacrificing everything. Paul is working it out in real time, word by word on the page, if it is better to “depart and be with Christ” or “remain in the body... and continue with the Philippians for progress and joy in the faith.”

He is trying to write himself into mustering the courage to keep at it, to do the hard thing morning after morning, night after night.

In the American prison industrial complex, we know that there are more people in solitary confinement than anywhere else in the world. In the collection of essays called *Hell is A Very Small Place*, about the experience of solitary confinement in America, Shaka Senghor says “I start to keep a journal and between the thin pages of a notepad I make sense of the person I've become. The officers have no interest in seeing me turn my life around; to most of them, I represent job security.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul too is writing to make sense of the person he's become. He is working out his path from that impossible place where the people he holds most dear are worlds away, and the people who hold him prisoner could care less about his survival.

Poet Christian Wiman writes that he has long been impacted by the writings of Simone Weil. In one particular essay, “Weil describes two prisoners who are in solitary confinement next to each other. Between them is a stone wall.

<sup>3</sup>Alfredo Alzugarat, *Trincheras de papel: dictadura y literatura carcelaria en Uruguay*, Montevideo: Trilce, 2007.

<sup>4</sup>Casella, Jean, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*, 2016.

## —The Great Prayer— The Reverend Christine Hides

Over a period of time—and I think we have to imagine it as a very long time—they find a way to communicate using taps and scratches. The wall is what separates them, but it is also the only means they have of communicating. “It is same with us and God,” Simone Weil says, “Every separation is a link.”<sup>5</sup>

William Ayot says it another way in his poem *Anyone Can Sing*:

Anyone can sing. You just open your mouth,  
and give shape to a sound. Anyone can sing.  
What is harder, is to proclaim the soul,  
to initiate a wild and necessary deepening:  
to give the voice broad, sonorous wings  
of solitude, grief, and celebration,  
to fill the body with the echoes of voices  
lost long ago...—to fill the void  
with every hurt, every harm, every hard-won joy  
that staves off death yet honours its coming,  
to sing both full and utterly empty,  
alone and conjoined, exiled and at home,  
to sing what people feel most keenly  
yet never acknowledge until you sing it.  
Anyone can sing. Yes. Anyone can sing.<sup>6</sup>

Maybe then the joy Paul speaks of from prison, the joy he longs for his friends at Philippi to receive, isn't so complicated after all. “Every separation is a link.” And in such linking, we can again give voice to that wild and necessary deepening where solitude, grief and celebration fill the body... every hard-won joy that staves off death yet honors its coming, filling the void. Amen

---

<sup>5</sup>Wiman, Christian. “Gazing Into the Abyss - The American Scholar.” *The American Scholar*, September 19, 2013. <https://theamericanscholar.org/gazing-into-the-abyss/>.

<sup>6</sup>Ayot, William. *Small Things That Matter*, 2003.

*\*You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author's name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*

God of the trailhead, God of the wilderness, God who makes a camp among us, God of the threshold who greets us with open arms as we make our way home, we delight in the joys of this week: your presence in the moonlit sky and the shimmering meteors. You whisper through the tree branches, accompanying the melody of hope sung by morning birds, These summer days are alive with opportunities to gather with friends and enjoy your creation.

God of the journey, our guide and companion, you lead us through the unmarked and unmaintained trails, up the steep hills where we can barely catch our breath, you walk with us as we chart a new course when the way before us is blocked. Dwell with us along the river's edge, in this splendid sanctuary, and at the bedside of the sick. Be our strength as we face our fears, our illnesses, our losses, and our addictions. Like our ancestors, let us build cairns to mark the sacred path. We search for you, holy God, longing for the deep peace and joy which passes understanding. And as we wander these worried and wonderful ways, you make for us a festival of people to rejoice with us, to weep with us, to walk with us in our suffering.

We trust our cares and concerns to you: praying especially those who are settling into new homes, for those readying for a new school year, for those struggling with long illnesses, for those who grieve loved ones. We pray for those in need of employment or companionship. Make a way, O Lord, through the long search.

Just as you have guided our confirmands safely through the wilderness, revealing your glory in the mountains and waterfalls, we ask you to be present with us in our daily lives. Help us to turn from our distractions and stay attentive to your presence in our midst. Show us how to live as Jesus Christ, the one who walked among us, traversing a path of peace and love rather than power and privilege.

Pour out your Holy Spirit, O God, on your people gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. By your Spirit make us one body in Christ, one in mission and ministry to the world. Nourish us in faith, hope, and love, and strengthen us for service, until we feast with you in glory. All praise and honor and glory are yours, holy triune God, now and forever, as we join our voices in the ancient prayer: Our Father.... Amen.