

A Reason to Rejoice

A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 22, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

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.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.
(Philippians 4:1-9, NRSV)

It's one of the best "don't worry, be happy, feel-good" lines of the Bible: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" And the passage goes on to talk about knowing the peace of God which passes all understanding. In times like these, that'll preach! In times like these, we could all use some more joy and peace in our lives.

Maybe that's the appeal of the most popular TV ministers ... You know, the ones who project the brightest of messages, the sunniest of lives ... A good-looking, self-assured preacher with an Armani suit and a private plane who stands before a vast audience near and far ... radiating positivity and success ... preaching a Be-happy, prosperity gospel, sold with a smile. Rejoice, my friends! Believe God's word (and show your belief with a love gift!) and you too can have what I have. Just have faith, stay positive, keep praising God, and your ship will come in too! The point seems to be that life's ultimate wisdom is just to keep on smiling, keep on praising, keep on rejoicing all the way home, until all your problems melt away.

Now, I don't mean to be a "Debbie Downer," but it just doesn't work that way. That's just not the way life is. I would love for it to be that simple, but you and I both know that it's not. Life is not fair, and terrible things happen. Hard times come, and sometimes they stick around.

To be fair to folks, it's no wonder that we latch on to any positivity we can just to stay sane, but this "Be-happy" gospel is an *escape* from the world, not an engagement with it.

So, what do we do with the Apostle Paul's words about rejoicing always? It would be easy to hear his advice to the Philippians much in the same way as we hear the phony message of the Prosperity preachers. It would be easy to look on the upheaval of the world right now, at the upheaval in our own lives and the lives of those we love, and then hear Paul exuberantly telling us to rejoice, and then wonder if he "gets it" at all.

But *this* scriptural call to "Rejoice" is not coming from a peppy TV preacher, but from a man who is in prison for doing *exactly* what God has called him to do. And he sits there in chains,

- ❖ knowing all the while that his enemies are themselves rejoicing in his imprisonment ...
- ❖ knowing that while he is stuck there, this fledgling Christian community in Philippi *need* him ...
- ❖ knowing that two women with whom he had worked, whom he loved and respected as his partners in ministry, were quarreling with one another.

No, Paul was no stranger to trouble. He had a talent for making enemies ... he endured things for the sake of the gospel that folks like us could hardly get our minds around. But in the midst of these troubles, as he wastes away in a cell and has every reason in the world to curse his fate, he finds within the strength to take another road.

From the beginning of his letter, his thoughts move beyond his own misery to his warm affection for those Philippian believers ... thanking God every time he remembers them, as they hold him in their heart and share in his ministry. As rats scamper past his feet, he feels again his longing for them with the compassion of Jesus, and offers his prayer for them, "that [their] love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help [them] to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ [they] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:9-11, NRSV)

Paul moves beyond the misery of his conditions to reflect on how his imprisonment has actually been an occasion for Christ to be proclaimed, and *that's* something to celebrate. He looks beyond his own humiliation to meditate on the beauty of Christ who humbly emptied himself, sacrificing himself in love for us all.

This then naturally turns his mind to a place of tender gratitude for those who themselves have sacrificed so much ... those who have surrendered their own agendas to serve alongside him ... Timothy whom he loves like a son, and Epaphroditus, like a brother.

There had been a time when other things formed his identity – like pride in birth and nation, education, status – but filled as he is now with love for Christ, he knows he was saved from all that. Christ is now his reason for being ... his all in all ... his north and south and east and west ... and tapping deeply into the joy of this new identity, he *knows* that his work and ours, his trials and ours, are not in vain. And that is a reason to rejoice!

Now, perhaps we might be thinking that all this sounds good, but isn't something that we can do. We're not "saints" ... we're not Paul ... we're not that strong. But here's the thing: it's not really about "strength" at all. Paul was no less human than we are.

The reason we don't bring everything to God in prayer is not because we're "weak," but because we've become so accustomed to feeling anxious, worrying, nursing grudges, that we scarcely notice it anymore. We meditate on the negative without even realizing that we're doing it. Perhaps it's hard even to imagine things being different. And so, the joy and peace Paul talks about remains for us more wistful aspiration than reality.

But it need not be this way. Today, hear the Spirit's call to freedom! Hear the words of Jesus afresh: "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." The worries and fears we claim for our own need a new address. May we earnestly pray for the grace to learn to let go of them and give them to God. God is able to bear them.

And as we learn, however slowly, to let go, we find that habits of anxiety are replaced by habits of gratitude ... meditations on fear and scarcity are replaced by meditations on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable" ... on all that which is excellent and worthy of praise.

And so, our minds turn to the good in our lives, to the manifold ways in which we have been blessed beyond measure. And we find the power within to *rejoice* in the face of trials – not because we're phony or delusional, or still less because we're somehow super-human saints – but because we are able to see more clearly – better and better with each passing day – the beauty and grace and glory of God. Amen.