

“Rejoice in the Lord Always; Again, I Say Rejoice”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 12, 2014

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Holy Scriptures: Philippians 4: 1-9

1 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.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** 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.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 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. **9** 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.

Sermon

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, Rejoice!”

Here are some observations about Paul’s letter to the Christian Church in Philippi.

First, the letter is written in some of the purest Greek found in the New Testament.

The Letter to the Philippians was written with great care and attention to detail.

Further, this is a love letter to a beloved people of God.

As love letters go, this one is focused, pithy, and principled.

The greeting and opening salutation is delightful and gracious.

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in
Philippi,*

with the bishops and deacons:

*Grace to you and peace from God our [Creator] and
the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I thank my God every time I remember you,
constantly praying with joy*

*in every one of my prayers for all of
you,
because of your sharing in the
gospel
from the first day until
now. (Phil. 1: 1-5)*

Imagine how good it feels to be told

that someone is constantly praying with joy for you!

One day a member of our congregation was recovering in the hospital

after being badly hurt in a car accident.

She shared with us later that

when she saw Minnie Haynes, Millie Suttles and Frances Shumake

striding down the hospital hallway toward her bedside,

she knew in a heartbeat that these three joy-filled prayer warriors

were about to put her in touch with God's healing power.

“Knowing their joy and prayer life,” she said,

“neither broken bones nor the devil stood a chance.”

In the second chapter of Philippians

we find a rare example of an early Christian hymn.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point
of death—
even death on a cross.*

Finally, after greeting God's people, praying for them,
and offering a hymn for their spiritual edification,
the Apostle Paul gets to sharing the message.

Paul preaches with love and grace.

In his commentary on Philippians, Fred Craddock defines
this grace as "love in action."

Grace abounds in Paul's teaching and preaching to the
congregation.

Clearly Paul is being a channel for the Holy Spirit,
sharing and expressing what has been given to him,
offering divine wisdom to the members and friends of
Christ's Church.

He recognizes and gives light

to the challenges and growing edges in the faith
community,

and then he offers gracious alternatives

for how folks can live and breathe, think
and relate.

Here is the Word;

here is the matter for the day;

here now is the Lord's business.

Even though he has been gone from Philippi for a bit,

Paul is quite cognizant of wavering and struggling
relationships

in the church and community.

*1 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.*

*2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the
same mind in the Lord.*

*3 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.*

Help these people, Lord. Help your Church!

A friend of a friend guest-preached one Sunday in Memphis.

He is white and spoke at a primarily African American congregation.

He happily told my clergy group about his experience.

He told us how much they loved him and his sermon, offering lots of feedback.

Our African American clergy in the group asked him exactly what the feedback was.

He said, “Oh, the church members kept shouting, ‘Help him, Lord! Help him!’”

Help us, Lord, help us!

Some folks are doing the Hokey Pokey, with one foot in and one foot out.

(This past summer one of my church campers wore a t-shirt that asked,

“What if the Hokey Pokey is what it’s all about?”)

Some folks are in dispute,

caught up in misunderstandings and tripped up by

miscommunications.

Some folks are anxious from their past,
unsure in their present,
or worried about their future.

Some folks are holding back, or holding out, or holding off
from going all in the God Movement.

Some folks are conflicted due to personality differences,
political differences,
or dogma differences.

One of our neighbors has a bumper sticker that reads,
“I’m sorry that my Karma ran over your Dogma.”

Actually, there is a lot of divine truth in that statement.

Karma speaks of our connection with the Holy Spirit, with
love and mercy and fairness.

Karma overrules and overcomes Dogma, meaning teaching,
if and when such teaching is not grounded in grace
and wholeness and mercy.

When our dogma, our teaching, is not grounded in the goal
of building healthy relationships,
of connecting people to God and one another
and our true Self,
then such teaching really does need to
be run over.

Here is how Paul responds to church folks
who are wavering in their commitment,
struggling in their relationships,
and worried or anxious in life.

Paul faces such challenges head on, with grace and love,
saying,

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

6 Do not worry about anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving

let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Focus on the joy in your life that is found in the Lord.

Let us hear that again: Focus on the joy in your life that is found in the Lord.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice!”

Paul points out that rejoicing in the Lord
shapes one’s character.

Focusing on what is good and joyful that comes from God
strengthens us,
especially when we waver and worry and wander.

Considering that we have on average 50,000 thoughts per
day,
use them positively.

When folks rejoice in the Lord always it is contagious and
uplifting.

In the film “Sister Act,” Whoopie Goldberg’s character

takes shelter in a convent and church to get away from the Mob.

Early on the dreary priest looks out over his congregation,
and then says, "*Where is everybody?*"

Spoiler alert:

Whoopi Goldberg as Sister Mary Clarence guides the church

to focus on mission and community service and
to express their joy,

to rejoice in the Lord always.

Before the film credits roll they discover new life and strengthened relationships.

When you focus on joy, when you rejoice in the Lord always,
you discover that you can put aside and overcome
your fears.

Your faith comes to the forefront and takes control of your
life.

No longer are you afraid.

God is still God.

God is nigh,

God is my strength and my shield, by savior and my
redeemer.

Of whom shall I fear?

And if you find that you are still afraid,

that your faith is shaky or it's taken a breather,
rejoice anyway and always because the faith of
your friends can save you.

That is so right.

Paul has confidence that the faith
of church members and friends will lift you up,
just as the church lifted him up.

When Paul was broke and broken,
in prison or shipwrecked or bravely coping with a
thorn in his side,
the prayers and gifts of love and kindness from
his faith community
made the difference between life and
death.

The faith of your church members and friends can and will
save you;
let our rejoicing and joy fill you and lift you up;
let our joy ease your burdens and carry the day.

And one day sooner than you think your joy-filled faith will
save someone else.

Paul noticed that when we rejoice in the Lord always,
we don't have time or energy to spend on fears,
fears that stymie or stagnate or stump or stall
our lives.

A common fright we witness in this day and age is the fear of scarcity.

When we accept scarcity as a way of life

then we are, in effect,

proclaiming to the world that,

“I’m a Christian. I loooove God.

*However I do not trust in the
Lord.”*

Fear of scarcity can dominate our worldview

to such an extent that deep down in our hearts

we really do not believe that the Lord will
provide.

So we think -- and so we act –

“I am going to hold back in my giving and my living,

because I do not really trust that the Lord will
provide.

I’m going to think about my own needs first and
foremost,

and therefore I’ll share less than I ought

because I might need it later.”

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is

to talk ourselves out of things than into them?

We are so good at making excuses

about why we should not serve or share,

why we can't sanction or sacrifice for another soul.

Truth be known, we can justify anything

when it comes to hoarding or holding out or holding on to our stuff.

Jesus said, *"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*

Jesus was on target spiritually and psychologically.

Our hearts and minds and bodies follow closely wherever we invest our treasure.

So wherever our checkbook or wallet or credit cards indicate our investments lie,

there will be our hearts, our souls, and our minds.

Be a joyful and generous giver of the best of yourself, your time and tithes.

Our faithful stewardship calls us to the highest expression of who we are called to be and become.

You've heard it here before:

the opposite of faith is not doubt;

the opposite of faith is fear.

When we fear

we worry; we get anxious; we get wrapped up in our selves.

Worrying is praying for something you don't want.

What we do want in our lives is more joy.

So let go of your fears.

Trust in the Lord to provide.

Rejoice in the Lord always!

It stands to reason that when we rejoice in the Lord always,

we are apt, we are inclined, we are destined

to be more positive, more trusting, more generous.

Leslie Weatherhead observed that,

“The opposite of joy is not sorrow. The opposite of joy is unbelief.”

Joy in God's loving activity in our daily lives

is expressed in our positive attitudes, trusting actions, & faithful generosity.

So come to the Lord's Table alongside the whole people of God

and set down your burdens and your worries.

Go all in for the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Put your wavering aside.

Reconcile with each other and celebrate what you have in common.

“Let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 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.

9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned

and received and heard and seen in me [and in Christ's Church],

and the God of peace will be with you.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!