

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

October 15, 2023

Deep Well of Joy

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: October 25, 2023

We never know exactly what precipitated any of Paul's letters since we read only one side of the correspondence. Even as he writes to people with archaic names who practice some really odd customs, he addresses basic human longings. He cuts through fear and division to turn our focus on what God reveals for us through Christ Jesus. He lifts us from sorrow to rejoice.

The Letter to Philippians was composed while he was imprisoned and facing execution. Never complaining or mentioning his suffering, he implores his readers, over and over, to set aside their carefully curated lives and be open to God through their fellowship in the church.

He reminds them that how they live with one another, love one another, and allow themselves to be loved is what leads to salvation in this life and life eternal.

Today's reading begins his final crescendo.

Dear God, as the world devolves in violence with terrorist attacks and bombs that rain on innocents, we tremble before human suffering. Calm our anxious hearts. Send your spirit among us so we hear your voice in these ancient words. Turn us away from despair and to one another and to your son. Amen.

Philippians 4:1-9

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche *to be of the same mind* in the Lord. ³Yes, 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 coworkers*, whose names are in the book of life.

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

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. ⁹As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Imagine an acquaintance invites you to a potluck in their home. You anticipate a casual gathering over a shared meal, a way to get to know them and let them know you.

So you pull out the recipe for that spinach salad others seem to enjoy. You find the just-ripe strawberries. Because the recipe card faded, you kind of guess at the ingredient proportions for the vinaigrette dressing.

You change into comfortable but still nicer clothes to make a good impression. When you show up at the door, you receive a warm welcome. They take your coat. You settle into a chair in the kitchen – the place of real conversation. A beverage is poured. And, you meet another neighbor.

This potluck turns unusual though when that neighbor asks you about your mom.

You think to yourself, how could they know my mom died earlier this year and today I'm really hurting as I think of her. Others expect you to be "moving on." Whatever that means? You confide your mom's passing and mention she created the spinach salad recipe. Her handwriting on that card brings a smile to your face and being able to talk about her warms your broken heart.

Somehow this total stranger seems to have seen your shadow of sorrow. You thought no one knew.

That shadow that follows you, it weighs on your heart. You think you can mask it and yet it is somehow entirely visible to your host and other guests. Your sorrow goes everywhere with you, even to a potluck.

And then you see a person hanging around the seven-layer dip as their sorrow holds them from visiting the bar. You wonder if that person will stay sober with their alcoholic past looming so dark. Thankfully someone else, drinking a ginger ale, strikes up a conversation. They both smile from a shared vulnerability.

Across the family room another person reaches for the pigs-in-blanket. They surprise you as they only hold that tasty morsel, letting it turn cold. Anxiety over their child's mental illness suppresses any appetite. Then you remember how your nephew fell into a depression and sorrow starved your brother to skin and bones. You pick up a little, doughy hot-dog and connect with this stranger in a way that melts away shame. The person relaxes, finally dips into the yellow mustard, and takes a bite.

The family at the end of the cul-de-sac arrives, carrying a tray of mac-n-cheese along with a shadowy load of debt. It dawns on you: you've seen the mom around during the day and now notices unemployment's sorrow. She lost her job for taking too much time off to care for a parent, which led to their car being repossessed, not sold. No wonder she sometimes lashes out. You offer to let her daughter carpool with yours to choir

rehearsal. Relief softens her face, and her eyes grow wet with tears.

The humble honesty served at this potluck feeds your soul. Once you surrender to sorrow and suffering as a part of human existence, inherent in your life and another's, you get to drink from the deep well of joy found in relationships. Through sorrow we access the joy only known through relationship. God never prescribes or delivers sorrow to us. God brings joy to us through those who accompany us in life.

The poet Ross Gay's book *Inciting Joy* inspired this idea of a potluck.

He writes,

Rather than quarantining ourselves or running from sorrow, rather than warring with sorrow, we lay down our swords and invite sorrow in. I'm suggesting we make sorrow some tea from the lemon balm in the garden.

Gay defines joy as an ember that ignites from the wild and unpredictable solidarity between people.

Through story after story, he points to sharing the messiness of our lives as the path to joy. Such as, playing basketball and working through conflict to get to real teamwork. Or, collecting seeds and turning an abandoned lot into a community garden. It requires a team to confront the cynicism

that an urban slum kills both plants and people. You prove it wrong. What started as putting collective hands in the dirt to grow food, fostered solidarity across the sorrow of their slum, and led to shared joy. In his most poignant essay, he describes his dad languishing in an ICU and dying. The nurses' compassion instilled a joy from the frailty and beauty of all human life.

The joy that emerges from sorrow drives us to pursue solidarity with other people. Shared sorrow incites joy. Then the pattern repeats. More sharing. More honesty. More caring. More joy.

He concludes his make-believe potluck with,

Around those chocolate chip cookies gathers a gaggle of guests and their sorrows giggling and pretending to fight over the last cookie before one of the sorrows breaks it into ten pieces and they all take their bite from sorrow's hand, moaning like a choir.¹

We know something of collecting around a table and sharing in bread broken for us. We know something of bringing our whole selves to a table where Christ Jesus invites us to a taste of his sorrow and receive his eternal gift.

Human suffering is where the rubber meets the road for Paul. Before meeting the risen Christ, he persecuted the early

¹ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy, Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2022), 9.

Christians. He caused their pain. He terrorized them for believing.

Once he devoted himself to God through Christ, he began to do the same things as Jesus. He shared his table with others. He reached across what divides people. He baptized others into Christ's body, uniting them with Christ and one another.

And now he suffers under the authorities and awaits death. His letters never mention pain or fear. By living in Christ, Paul rejoices. Paul gives thanks because he no longer fears life or death. A few years before penning his Letter to the Philippians, he wrote to the congregations in Rome:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:35).

The answer is “nothing.”

He trusts that Christian joy is subversive; it overturns threatening situations and frustrates those with selfish plans. Tyrants fear joy – they cannot manipulate us when we share one another's sorrows and joy.

So Paul urges the people of Philippi to unite in the mind of Christ. He instructs them “to do,” meaning to act as Paul taught them. Christian faith calls us to a way of believing, a new way of behaving, and creates a way of belonging. Share the table. Welcome the foreigner. Respect all of humanity.

Worship God, alone. Joy comes in solidarity with one another because salvation comes from solidarity with others through Christ Jesus.

To see the plight of innocent Palestinians in Gaza and the suffering of Israelis twists us in knots. And we know the violence will grow worse in the coming days, only adding to our feeling of helplessness before it ends.

We may not be in control of governments, but we surely have the responsibility of our own hearts. When inhumanity is on full display, the best thing we can do is show the world the very best of our humanity. In this time of overwhelming grief, fear, hate and despair, the one thing we can do, wherever we are, is to love our neighbor and love God.

Let me close with a story from Dr. Tamara Rettino who lives in Buffalo.

I am Jewish. My neighbor is a Palestinian Muslim, Zahai. Today, I brought her baklava, a homemade tea blend and homemade soap, and a large orchid. She took me into her arms, and we cried. We talked for a long, long time.

Her husband served me Arabic coffee and she served me stuffed grape leaves. They sent me home with more grape leaves, lamb for Greg, a kaffiyeh, and their last bag of cardamom coffee from Palestine. They talked

about how nice Greg is for shoveling their snow. She said she would make kenafe (my favorite Palestinian desert) for me.

Stop making change theoretical and abstract. It is knocking on neighbor's doors and sharing coffee and sweets. It is telling each other stories. It is heart to heart, neighbor to neighbor. We are all human. We all want a place to call home and for our babies and grandmothers to be safe. Peace begins with me.²

Our faith calls us to love people equally of all faith traditions and to those of no faith.

May we find the courage to feel the pain and grief of the innocent who are suffering because the moment we cease to feel is the moment we cease to love.

When the world is tilted in the direction of destruction and death, each one of us is needed in the small corners of our worlds to push back the forces of inhumanity and restore the balance to our world. Its when we cease to be human.

²[https://www.facebook.com/acupunktrix?_cft__\[0\]=AZXUyS14bAJufS9XTnAZU2iLvBlrMXhXqcuwNXfZkAlpen12y76nbzlyBssHxLuV5_j8XN1rVyZqERxCNGIRki0OpmHIW-wpz-f7ffbulQbllgeQBiWsXiVSoR1Zc6b95IFdbpNOiQ4RqlcjZVJFWmtJF3Zf-x5eDPr7nglAN4S6Zb5ONmhiqel5cw7IFmEMi3Q&_tn_=-UC%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/acupunktrix?_cft__[0]=AZXUyS14bAJufS9XTnAZU2iLvBlrMXhXqcuwNXfZkAlpen12y76nbzlyBssHxLuV5_j8XN1rVyZqERxCNGIRki0OpmHIW-wpz-f7ffbulQbllgeQBiWsXiVSoR1Zc6b95IFdbpNOiQ4RqlcjZVJFWmtJF3Zf-x5eDPr7nglAN4S6Zb5ONmhiqel5cw7IFmEMi3Q&_tn_=-UC%2CP-R)

Be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. Show up for one another to hold their sorrows and participate in their joys. They will do the same for you. This is what we learn to do at church. Accept people as they are. By “church” I do not mean this building...this is perishable and inanimate. By “church” I mean the people who receive life from Christ Jesus through baptism and who witness that love to the world.

Be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. Share his love with the person next to you and across the chasms that others fabricate to separate us. In his church we practice forgiveness and receive grace and then we work to restore peace and justice without exception.

Be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. Belong to him through this, his church, your church.



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