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SERMON

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Here for Joy

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Introduction

This week, we begin a sermon series exploring the question, “What are we here for?”

For early church communities and first century followers of Christ, this was an essential question.

“What are we here for?” led people to open their homes for worship and prayer, even when it was unlawful.

“What are we here for?” led communities to pull together their money to take care of the poor, widows, orphans, immigrants among them.

“What are we here for?” led individuals to embrace the sick and care for them; leaders to boldly proclaim Jesus as Lord, even when it led their arrests; ordinary people to break down barriers of ethnicity, religion, culture, gender, and language through relationships centered in Christ.

In the coming weeks, letters from the Apostle Paul to early churches will be our guide as we explore what we are here for—We as part of Christ’s Church, and you and I as individuals in relationship with the living God.

Paul’s journey to following Jesus and becoming the most prolific writer of the New Testament was a whirlwind.

Paul began as a persecutor of Christians. As he tells his own story, he held the coats of those who threw stones and martyred the deacon, Stephen. Paul continued on the road to seek out these rabble rousers, who spoke of Jesus as Lord and confused faithful Jews, while instigating Roman

authorities. He saw the early Christians and their communities as threats, and they needed to be silenced.

You may know the turning point of Paul's story: The road to Damascus. Paul had a profound spiritual encounter with Christ, and with a follower of Jesus named Ananias. You can find the story in Acts 9 if you're curious. But Paul's life was disrupted by God's Spirit, and he was transformed. "What he was here for" changed from being a bouncer for his faith to opening the doors wide and running into the streets to invite everyone who had been left out into God's story of grace.

From there, Paul was chased out of towns, shipwrecked, imprisoned several times, rejected by the other apostles before he was haltingly accepted; he was often brash and spoke boldly; he wrote and wrote; and he travelled extensively, cultivating and encouraging small Christian communities, who in turn created networks of mutual support.

In his letters, there are threads that hold together the core of his call and the call of these new followers of Christ.

Perhaps the most surprising thread in these letters, many written from prison cells and to persecuted communities, is joy.

This morning, we will turn to Paul's epistle, or letter, of joy: Philippians.

Because, as the imprisoned Paul will remind us, we are here for joy.

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, we turn now to Scripture.

Meet us in these ancient words.

Where joy feels fragile, strengthen it.

Where hope feels thin, renew it.

Shape us again into your people.

We pray in the name of your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ,
Amen.

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-11

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the
bishops and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God for every remembrance of you, 4 always in
every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy 5 for
your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I
am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in
you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. 7
It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I
hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's
grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and
confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long
for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And
this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and
more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to
determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you
may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of
righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory
and praise of God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul's Joy

Paul had the tendency to get thrown into jail. And for good reason. In a time when the emperor was also considered the son of god and lord and savior of the world, it was treasonous to apply those terms to a Jewish man from Nazareth, who the empire had nailed to a cross not too long ago, even if you really thought that man had come back to life.

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from jail, and he was not sure if this would be the time that the state finally executed him. And he wrote to a people living in a Roman colony with a large population of retired Roman soldiers. Philippi was a Roman colony, proud to be a Roman colony. This was a place where the Gospel itself bordered on treason. How could Gentiles, who respected the emperor, who were expected to pray to the gods for the good of their neighbors, turn away from their people and join a fringe Jewish movement? It was odd. It put into question their allegiances.

And yet, Paul writes to them not of self-protection, not of resentment, not of fear. He writes to them of joy.

In the short letter of Philippians, Paul uses the word joy sixteen times.

Joy has little to do with comfortable circumstances. It has nothing to do with being on top.

It has everything to do with God's grace made real to us.

Excavating Sorrow

Paul writes that his joy is rooted in the partnership he found in the people of Philippi. They are his community. He came to Philippi and shared his heart and his life with these people. While in prison, they supported him. They are true koinonia to one another.

This “partnership in the gospel” and in “God’s grace” that Paul writes about uses the same word, koinonia, that we most often translate “church.” It wasn’t a building. It wasn’t a particular form of worship. They were koinonia because they shared their lives. And in the messiness of opening their homes, eating together, giving generously, singing and learning the Scriptures, and lending encouragement when things were scary—in the messiness of sharing in the gospel and God’s grace, there was joy.

In our hardships, joy can get buried. Comparison, the need to pretend everything is OK when it isn’t, or worry about how others will react—these bury our sorrow deep inside and leave little room for joy, too. But when a community can be koinonia, and bear the honesty of sorrow with grace, we can excavate the pride and fear that hide it deep inside, and that makes room for joy to trickle in.

We do not ignore the sorrow. We do not belittle the pain.

In sharing our sorrows, the alchemy of God’s grace turns mourning into laughter.

Following my grandfather's funeral, we gathered around round plastic tables for lunch. Aunts and uncles, cousins, second cousins, first cousins twice removed ... I was somehow related to just about every person in the room, but I couldn't quite tell you how. Our three-year-old, ran in circles with the other young children, giggling and screeching, as generations of our family told stories.

Family is always complicated. Sometimes funerals can bring out the rose-colored glasses, sometimes they rip off the band aid of old wounds, sometimes offer a space to excavate sorrow and let joy seep in. Usually, it's a little of everything.

What we did that afternoon more than anything was laugh. I have been to many funerals and many luncheons, and laughter is almost universal. At some point, the sorrow gives way, and we crack up.

I've experienced this in small groups and in one-on-one meetings, when difficult prayers are shared, when we try to hold back tears but they come anyway, when vulnerability sneaks up on us and breaks down our cheerful masks ... a little quip, a friendly ribbing, a dark but hilarious joke cracks everything open, and joy makes its way in.

Joy is not callousness or indifference to the pain in our lives or that others hold or in the world. Joy is not sacrilegious or flippant. Joy is defiant. It is resistance to the drumbeat of despair. It is God's grace made real within us. The hope of the empty cross sneaking into our daily lives. Because though we cannot and will not deny the pain of suffering, we know that it does not have the last word.

Defying despair

Joy that is rooted in the promise that God is still at work and is making all things new is not just a nice idea; it is desperately needed hope for us, for our deeply divided country, and for our broken world.

You all know that this week, a woman named Renee Good was killed by an ICE agent in Minneapolis. As has become commonplace in our common life, everyone has had access to videos of this horrific tragedy. And, as has also become commonplace, each of us has been handed ready-made narratives, depending on our political leanings, choice of news outlets, and the algorithms that control our social media feeds, so we don't have to grapple with the true human sorrow of it all.

A woman died. Her children are now without their mother. Her partner is left to pick up the pieces. Her parents will bury their daughter. A man will live with the reality of taking another's life. The families of both these people will be harassed because that, too, is the age we live in.

There is deep sorrow here. And we cannot push it aside. We must excavate the sorrow—name the injustice and chaos that increased raids and deportations have brought to our cities, name that this is not right, this is not good for anyone involved, and this is not the path to God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

And then, joining with the clergy and people of faith, who gathered in prayer and vigil on Thursday night in Minneapolis, we, too, must remember that suffering, injustice, and death do not have the last word.

Joy is defiance to despair. Joy is resistance to fear.

Joy enflames our hearts to continue in the work of love because we are not alone in the challenges of this world or in our lives.

The empty cross reminds us again and again, that love has overcome. Love will overcome. Though the darkness may last for the night, joy comes with the morning.

So, we light a candle in the night. We commit again to walk in love. We name the sorrow and still allow ourselves to be surprised by joy.

Joy is the serious business of heaven

CS Lewis once wrote that, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Paul’s joy was rooted in the glimpses of heaven he had in this world. He knew that Christ was at work because he saw with his own eyes the Spirit moving in places like Philippi. He was part of creating these joyful pockets of praise and care and community that defied the social hierarchies and barriers of the time.

Joy came as light in the darkness. Joy was a glimpse into the promises of God’s kingdom.

In 1970, a year after the Stonewall uprising, the first Pride parades were organized. In defiance of the pain of that anniversary, Pride became a parade. A joyful, rebellious, tongue-in-cheek image of what it would look like for LGBTQ+ people to be free and accepted. A few hours of glimpsing that a different world was possible. One that was joyful instead of violent. This joyful resistance persevered even into the fear and injustice of the AIDS crisis.

Activist Dan Savage said, “During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced all night, and it was the dance that kept us in the fight because it was the dance we were fighting for.”

Near the same time, across the world, a singing revolution was beginning in the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Popular uprisings were calling for independence from the Soviet Union. Demonstrations began in public spaces, and over the course of four years, the collective action of singing tipped the scales toward freedom. Crowds sang traditional and patriotic songs of their pre-Soviet countries. They danced traditional dances. They sparked joy and communal memory, and it led to a non-violent revolution.

Frivolous joy is not counter to the serious work of the Gospel—the work of justice, peacemaking, hospitality, evangelism, and compassion.

Joy is the gift of God’s grace made real to us.

Joy is the gift of the person who will sit beside your hospital bed and make you laugh at the darkest joke.

Joy is the gift of teaching a man, living here as refugee, to drive a sedan when he has only ever driven a tank.

Joy is the gift of a baby being held for the first time in the NICU.

Joy is the gift of kids being lifted into the air as they dance in worship, and the gift of teenagers dressing up as grannies to play bingo;

Joy is the gift of someone's hand on your shoulder asking seriously how you are doing; the gift of a meal shared, of a door opened, of impossible to explain peace in otherwise awful circumstances.

It is the gift of silliness and lightness that is the serious business of heaven.

Make room for it. Embrace it when it surprises you. Let it move you, as Paul said, "that your love may overflow more and more."

We are here for joy. Even now, especially now.

Amen.



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