

REJOICING FOR THE LONG HAUL

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PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

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“Rejoicing for the Long Haul” | Philippians 4:1-9 | Pastor Jess Scholten

For the next 30 seconds or so, I want you to concentrate on counting all the things that you can see around you that are green – pay attention to them and see how many you can count.

Okay – how many green things did you see? Great. There are no right answers. Now keep looking right here at me and think back without looking – how many things did you see that were yellow or gold?

You can look around now and check out all the things you missed that were yellow.

I heard an example like this on one of the local radio stations recently (102.5) – it was a professor who was teaching his students that too often, we think God is going to work in a specific way, and so we only look for that; and we miss the many, many other ways God is at work. It’s the same thing with whatever way we focus our mind. Too often, we only pay attention to the green in our lives – and we miss all the gold that’s all around.

We’ve been reading through Paul’s letter to the Philippians and thinking about joy. It’s not like everything was going swimmingly for Paul when he wrote this letter. Followers of Jesus were being persecuted, even killed, for their faith. Paul himself was in prison – or house arrest technically in Rome – awaiting trial. For two years, he was basically chained by his left hand to a prison guard. This week we start the closing chapter where Paul gives us some important reminders of the kinds of things on which we need to focus – things that will help us rejoice in the Lord always. Hear what God has to say to the church today through Philippians 4, the first 9 verses (NRSV):

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. 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. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry 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.

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. 9Keep 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.

Thanks be to God for this God's holy word.

So, what are you paying attention to? Are you concentrating on the green and missing all the gold? These last several weeks as we've been focusing on Philippians as a congregation, we've tried to recognize more fully the ways we could concentrate on joy, and even better, more fully experience joy.

That's not to say there are not hardships – that people aren't dying because of war, that friends or relatives aren't still being diagnosed with or struggling with cancer or illness, that devastating things are not in the ethos around us. They are! There's still a lot of terrible things in the world we grieve. But the Apostle Paul – and we – are urging that in addition to being honest about all the difficulties, we can still hold joy.

We can balance hard times with joy. We can practice joy with humility and obedience. We can focus on the things which foster joy along the path. Joy can help us persevere, build community, and be grateful even in challenges.

In preparation for this series on joy, a few months ago, I pulled several books off my shelves with joy in the title or taglines, most of which I've read but a few I scanned through or started reading.

One might think these books on joy would be a ball of laughs. But to a T, all the books on joy are about the long obedience Pastor Charlie referenced last week. *Awakening Joy*, an upcoming read in my interfaith group, is about the Buddhist practices of mindfulness and compassion. *Joy Unspeakable* is a powerful book by Barbara Holmes about spiritual formation practices in the Black Church, contemplation rooted in West African culture, forged in slavery and activism, and lived out in Black leaders of faith like the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's pastor and mentor. There's a copy our church librarian Marty has highlighted on the cart by the welcome center. Even Adam Hamilton encourages simplicity and generosity to find joy.

Which goes to show sometimes we look for joy in the too-obvious places –at parties and binge-watching comedy, at the circus or Disneyworld.

We think joy is this (slide of child laughing at the fair) That's my cousin Emily on the tilt-o-whirl. Pure joy. (slide of child laughing on rollercoaster) That's Courtney-bug, a sorority sister's daughter who just turned 11 this past week. (slide of nephew and Jess being silly at Wisconsin Dells) We obviously found the camera on the ride for this one with our middle nephew Ryan.

Fun fact: you can google search your own photos with keyword "fun," and it is delightful. You can also search your camera roll for rollercoaster, and not all the photos are sheer joy. That's my brother and his now-fiancé having the time of their lives. I. was. not. (slide of 2 laughing people and one terrified Jess)

Of course, these things are joyous – most of the time. They make us happy, excited, thrilled. But when there's no rollercoaster park on the horizon or trips to the circus or cruises booked or wedding plans or promises of an amazing future, that's when the real practice of joy begins. That's when we practice rejoicing for the long haul.

Another one of the zenjoy books I'm in the middle of is, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Joy*, recommended by a spiritual director. Books on joy are in the air, right now. Even though the author is funny occasionally, it's not a comedy – it's a lesson in how Busy is not your friend. Being present, savoring the time, the too-often-unfamiliar virtue of contentment – these are the things that foster the goodness and internal feelings of peace and satisfaction that lead to deep joy.

That's where Paul reminds us of the simple joys highlighted in our faith. One, being part of a community of faith brings us joy. And two, where we focus our attention can increase our joy.

Being in community helps increase joy in our lives. It's part of the reason people of faith have statistically longer lives – there's mutual compassion and listening, serving together in meaningful ways, and people just genuinely caring for your well-being.

Paul is encouraging this kind of community. He shares his own love and gratitude for the church in Philippi – calling them siblings and his beloveds in Christ.

He encourages healthy community when he calls the members of the church to be of the same mind as one another. We don't actually know from these specific verses in chapter four that Euodia and Syntyche are in some sort of conflict, but there is suggestion from Paul earlier in the letter that something is coming between people in the community.

Paul bringing it up, even in a letter that will be read aloud in the church, means he trusts the congregation to be of help in this situation, trusting the faith community to be a place where we can grow and change. Fred Craddock, one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, suggests that in addition to joys and concerns, before we pray we could also examine those items to be settled among us. I don't think we need to close meetings with an airing of grievances, but we would do well to trust one another with the hurts of our lives with hope of healing rather than carrying the hurts ourselves or letting them fester or simply turning away from each other. (Interpretation: Philippians, Craddock, p. 70)

Paul follows this passage on caring for co-workers in the kingdom with, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice." How? With gentleness, knowing that God is always present.

Paul continues: Do not worry about anything. Do not worry about anything? I'm like degreed in worrying. Our culture right now is steeped in anxiety and fear. People with authority are fostering fear in some cases, because it takes up energy and time and keeps people complacent. Instead, Paul instructs us to bring our worries to prayer and to bring our requests along with thanksgiving to God, replacing anxiety with trust.

A friend told me a beautiful story recently about how she gave something over to God that was really hard at work... setting it down and trusting God. She couched the story: I'm not like all born-again Christian or anything, but the next day the situation was resolved.

I don't think it always happens like that – like some sort of magic trick. but there is something about releasing our grip on things that can shift what happens and give space for God to be at work. All of this leads to peace, which is what my friend felt when she released what felt like an impossible situation to God.

Lastly, Paul's... recipe... for joy includes focusing on what is good: whatever is honorable, pure, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. We can focus on a million other things – worries, anxieties, the news, things that may never come to be, or things right in front of us that are terrible and painful. But we also have agency of our own brains to remind ourselves that there is good around us. Don't miss the good gold by only looking out for the green.

Focusing on joy isn't about toxic positivity. It is about the deep truths of creating balance in our lives. Maybe this season for you is a good season, but we all have hard seasons sometimes. And maybe this season for you is full of pain or illness or devastating anxiety.

All the more reason to find balance – to find moments of joy, celebration, goodness, and gratitude.

Because we can hold both – we can have a bad day and have moments of goodness. We can have a great day and still sit on the ash heap with our neighbor or those who are oppressed or suffering.

Richard Rohr’s most recent book, *The Tears of Things*, opens with a poem, “For When People Ask,” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. She writes:

I want a word that means
 okay and not okay,
 more than that: a word that means
devastated and stunned with joy.
 I want the word that says
 I feel it all at once.
The heart is not like a songbird/ singing only one note at a time,
 more like a Tuvan throat singer
able to sing both a drone/ and simultaneously
 two or three harmonics high above it –
a sound, the Tuvans say,/ that gives the impression
 of wind swirling among rocks.
The heart understands swirl,/ how the churning of opposite feelings
 weaves through us like an insistent breeze
leads us wordlessly deeper into ourselves,
 blesses us with paradox (slide)
 so we might walk more openly
into this world so rife with devastation,
this world so ripe with joy.

My beloveds, go look for joy, today, this week, and on your life-long journey. May it be so. Amen.