

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Nevertheless, Rejoice
October 11, 2020
Philippians 4.1-9

Our epistle reading this morning from Philippians is short, but holds within its few verses some of the most beloved encouragement in the New Testament. These are some of the words that you cling to, that can save your life.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

The peace of God which passes understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is commendable. If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

These words of life are inscribed in wedding bands and engraved on headstones. They are whispered in prayers late on dark, lonely nights and early on daunting days. In some of the last words of Philippians, toward the end of his life, the Apostle Paul's pastoral sensibility soars, and through him, words of life are given to the world.

And all of this is given flight by the encouragement at the heart of this passage and this letter, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice." Philippians, the Epistle of Joy.

Twenty-seven years ago the seed of DaySpring was planted in the hearts and souls of the families who grew this church and who grew with it. You have to have some grit to start a church, I think. It's one thing for a group of friends to meet together for meals and a prayer and reading of scripture. It's quite another thing to say, "This is more than a group of friends. This is a church." At the very least it means you're vulnerable to one another and especially to the next person who walks through the door to join you. When you're a church, what you have doesn't belong to you; it's doors are open, it's heart is open; it's future is open. You're vulnerable to the Spirit of God.

I remember some of our founders telling me how terrified they were when the first visitor showed up on a Sunday morning. For church growth strategists, that moment is the whole point—to have one visitor and then 100 come through the door. Our folks felt that but also something else. They said, "It all became real. We realized we couldn't just quit and walk away. Our lives belonged to the next person who showed up. This was bigger than any of us." It takes some grit to start a church. It also takes some joy. I wonder how many churches begin with an earnest sense of mission, or with a church growth strategy binder but don't have joy. Without

joy, it's hard to sustain church, or much in life really. Annie Dillard said as a little girl just once she wanted one task that required all the joy she had within her.

DaySpring was about the weightiness of honoring God in church community, but went about it with a lighthearted joy. When you enter our little chapel, you're entering the Stokes Chapel, named for George and Katy Stokes. Katy brightened any room she walked into, and she brightened your life when she entered it. Of another founder, Kurt Kaiser, it was said that if there was any mirth in the room, Kurt would find it. His whistling was like a homing beacon for gladness. These are beautiful examples of the larger story that was unfolding in and through us in those early years. There was light here, mystical delight that carried us along.

As you know, joy is qualitatively different from happiness. It was joy that was here, which meant something unexpected. It didn't mean that you had to force some feigned happiness in order to fit in: *Everything's ok; it better be. Or you better put on your church face in order to fit in.*

Something different was happening here. No one programmed it or planned for it. It just happened. When people found themselves in a place of spiritual joy, they found could also be honest about their wounded-ness; honest with themselves and with one another and with God. This is a remarkable thing. Where joy is genuine and not manufactured or forced, it forms a safe place where pain is given space to do its work in us as long as it needs to do it. Some people needed to just come and sit and be left alone and weep. For week after week, and they could. Some people needed to just come and come to grips with what their life had become and was becoming without being forced to act as if everything was ok. They could. Some needed to ask hard questions about themselves and about God and the faith they were clinging to. And others needed someone to pick them up off the floor and help them find hope for one more day. Some people needed to be told, "You are loved. You still are. You always will be. Even when you're not exactly the most lovable person." We all need that from time to time!

Life is not always unicorns and rainbows. In a life like this, can you find joy? Can you be open when joy finds you?

In today's parable from Matthew 22, that dystopian, dark story is Jesus' commentary on people, the religious leaders there with him and more generally everyone, who absolutely refuse to come to celebration no matter how freely and graciously it is offered to them. In the story, the wedding feast table is set by the king, but the people who were invited turn their eyes and hearts to other things and will not come. Jesus has harsh words for those who miss the joy right in front of their eyes.

In contrast to this parable, the whole book of Philippians is about people who have every reason to hang their heads but don't somehow. The Apostle Paul, the writer of the letter, is in prison, and he doesn't know if he'll survive it this time. The recipients of the letter, the people of the little church in Philippi are in some sort of conflict that is burdening them. Eudoia and Synteche are at the center of it, and whatever's going on in their little community, life in that part of the

empire isn't easy anyway. If we think 2020 is remarkably bad, and there are lots of dark memes and jokes about that going around with good reason--when you want to cry sometimes you have to laugh--I promise we wouldn't swap it for 63 AD in Philippi or a prison cell in ancient Rome. This year's a doozy, but every year and every life have their challenges and always will.

We'll never fully know into what particular Philippian darkness shines the light of the letter to the Philippians, but it's not hard to be inspired by it. Karl Barth read Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice and observed, "Joy is a defiant 'Nevertheless' that Paul sets like a full stop against the Philippian anxiety." I love that. Nevertheless, rejoice. That's an encouraging word, I hope it is for you, too. Nevertheless, rejoice. Into what darkness does the light of God shine in your life today? What darkness are you walking in, and where can you find the light of God again?

You can hear the psalmist having this same conversation with himself in Psalm 42. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" Apparently he has good reason. The psalm reflects great pain in life from all that has been lost and then in the midst of it all, remembers: "Why are you cast down O my soul? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." Nevertheless, rejoice.

If any act symbolizes the rugged nature of joy in pain, of light in darkness, of life in death, it is what welcomes us to the altar table. We remember Jesus' broken body and shed blood; we remember his crucifixion; and through his death, we remember his resurrection and his life with us now in the Spirit. And even this too: that this isn't just an act of remembering something from the past, but that through the giving and receiving of this bread, Christ is alive within us. He is alive, with us, with you. With power sufficient that we can say, no matter what, nevertheless, I rejoice.

Far from circumstantial bliss lucky to avoid the pain of life; the Christian path leads to true joy through the pain of sacrificial suffering. This joy, this peace, this love indeed surpasses our understanding, and it guards broken hearts and minds against despair.

27 years after our founding, our lives have changed a lot; our church has changed a lot over the years. This year has challenging us in ways we could have never imagined.

Is the joy still there? Yes, by God. Yes, by the living God. The Lord is near, and the joy of the Lord is still our strength for these days.

Thanks be to God. Amen.