

Rejoicing in Ordinary Time

Scripture: Philippians 4:1-9

Introduction:

Paul is writing this letter from prison to the church at Philippi. It's been a long time since he's seen them, and he misses his beloved church. And he's not going to be seeing them any time soon. And the church is suffering. The joy that had energized the community when he was first with them is waning, partly because of his prolonged absence.

On top of that, the temple in Jerusalem, which had always been considered by the people to be the "dwelling place of God with us," has been destroyed by the occupying power – the Romans. And so now this little community is discouraged, and Paul is writing to encourage them.

All Paul's letters have a similar pattern to them: The first half is about Christ and what he has done for us, with his death and resurrection. And then the second half is what that mean for our lives.

Philippians 4:1-9

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.

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. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And 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. 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: Rejoicing in Ordinary Time

The Christian calendar has seasons and counts its Sundays within them. There are the obvious ones like Christmas and Easter – and I like to remind us that for Christians, these are not just celebration days, but they are whole seasons.

Most of the seasons of the Christian calendar are defined by a feast day – or celebration. So the season of Advent is preparation for Christmas; the season of Lent is preparation for Easter. The season of Epiphany takes the Christmas themes and fills the time before Lent.

But then there is one season which is not attached to a celebration Sunday and that's where we find ourselves now. In fact, it's not even a season and can be described two ways. One is the way we've been doing it – the Sunday's AFTER Pentecost – and there are many of them - nearly half the year – 25 this year.

It can also be called Ordinary Time. Not ordinary in the sense that these are mundane, routine Sundays. The word “ordinary” here comes from the Latin *ordinal* which means counted or ordered. But ordinary as ordinary does seem to also apply to these Sundays as we make our way from summer into fall.

And here in the midst of our Ordinary Time, the word from the Lord for us today is – REJOICE! Joy and rejoicing are a common theme in this entire letter to the Philippians – more than 12 times.

Remember, Paul is in prison, encouraging his beloved church to rejoice! A church which is being hunted by an oppressive and powerful Roman government, living in fear, worshipping in secret, hiding out lest they get discovered. And yet – Paul says – for those who follow Christ, there is another way.

The same powers that put Jesus to death are to be countered by living out *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding* (v.7). The key to knowing this peace is mutual gentleness, and that we *guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus* (v.7).

And guarding our hearts means focusing on...

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. 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. (v. 8-9)

Following Jesus means being a community of people who can sustain one another in the journey of faith, reminding each other of the joys along the journey itself, no matter how hard it gets.

For Christians, joy isn't just a suggestion or an encouragement. It's actually commanded to us. Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says.

Yet the joy Paul is commanding is more than what we might think it is. We think of joy as a private overflowing of good feelings in response to happy circumstances. We think of it as the goal and the point of our lives, an unalienable right given in the Declaration of Independence: Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

But for Paul, joy is shared, not individual; it is not a goal or an end in itself, but a by-product of our life in Christ. Joy is a discipline, not a right; and as I said, it's a command, not an option.

And this command “rejoice” is a plural word – you ALL rejoice – he’s writing after all to a group of people, not a single person.

And a word about the *gentleness* we’re to have. Gentleness is really forbearance or endurance – as married people who have been together for decades have.

Which makes sense – because joy is not complete unless it is shared. Remember, joy itself is not the goal; it is an outcome and a sign of the presence of the risen Christ – sort of like how on Halloween, we turn on the outside lights as a signal that there’s candy inside to be shared.

Joy is also a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances. Here’s one writer’s definition of it:

Joy is a response formed in those who can read the economy of God’s activity in particular ways and are able to act in conformity with that unfolding story (Stephen Fowl, *Philippians*, 2005, p. 181).

What he means is that Christians experience joy in places we would not particularly expect to... prison, the valley of the shadow of death, or during a pandemic.

Christian joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, freeing perspective.

The story of Thomas and Mary Morris is a perfect example of this. Remember back in 2001, when was discovered at the Post Office in Washington DC? One of the victims was Thomas Morris. Here’s his widow remembering him 10 years after he’d died: (As told to Story Corps, NPR, 10/7/11)

Thomas Morris worked for nearly 30 years at the Brentwood Post Office in Washington, D.C.

"When he would get off work, he would get home in the early morning and we would go out to eat breakfast at 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning," his wife, Mary, says.

The couple married on May 1, 1991, within 90 days of meeting each other at his father's funeral. Mary says she was impressed by how well he had looked after his mother.

"And you know if a man treats his mother right, he's going to treat his wife right," she explains during a visit to StoryCorps in Beach Park, Ill.

At one point back in 2001, Mary says, Thomas said he wasn't feeling well.

"We went to the doctor and the doctor said it sounded like flu symptoms," she says. "And one morning Thomas woke me up and said that something was really wrong. So he placed the call to 911, and they took him to the hospital. I expected him to come back home, but that wasn't to be the case."

Thomas Morris, 55, was one of two postal service workers to die in October 2001 after coming in contact with a letter laced with anthrax bacteria.

"After he passed, I was living by myself again, and Thomas' voice was on our answering machine," Mary recalls. "I don't know how, but I erased it, and I thought, I will never ever hear his voice again. But that would always have left me expecting something to happen that was never gonna happen. When someone passes you think that they are going to show up [at] the dinner table. It takes a while to get used to the fact that it's no more.

"I miss him, but then I think that with all those people going in and out of the Brentwood Post Office, only two died," she says. "That was nothing but the grace of God."

The Morrises were married for 10 years.

In the midst of her grief, Mary found the grace of God.

Christian joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, freeing perspective.

And it's not surprising that prayer is a big part of this. Instead of worrying about *anything*, the Philippians are to bring *everything* to God (v.6). Because as you know, the "anythings" and "everythings" of life can be sources of endless worry. So, Paul suggests, how about we turn them into the stuff of prayer instead?

And the verse on which all this hangs is right in the middle: *The Lord is near* (v.5). Or in the words of the Psalm, *Thou art with me*.

And when we know this – really know this – and then live it – that is, live with the confident knowledge that the Lord, Jesus, the Holy Spirit – God who is all of these, is with us in every circumstance, then we have the joy that Paul is talking about.

And two things occur: **we are sustained and it shows.**

Christians are not to be known for their power and might, or their problem-solving abilities, Christians are not to be people who in the midst of a crisis point fingers and get even; but rather we are to be characterized by our gentleness, our forbearance and our joy in the Lord.

Followers of Jesus are invited to help one another *in the work of the gospel* (v. 3), that is, to encourage each other to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

We have a metaphorical light on in our lives which alerts others to the joy we have in the Lord.

Because, if your joy is dependent on the things that happen in your day to day life, you'll be on a roller coaster and at the mercy of others. But if instead you can be reminded of what Christ has done for us on the cross and make that your defining identity, and the lens through which you interpret the anythings and everythings that come your way, the journey will be a bit smoother and you'll be traveling on solid ground.

Rejoicing in Ordinary Time.

What does this look like? I saw a video this week that illustrates this wonderfully. It's called "The Stethoscope."

A guy is walking along a city street and finds a stethoscope lying on the sidewalk. He picks it up and puts it on and places the listening end on the cookie he's eating and hears the song "Sugar, aw honey honey." he's startled and takes it off for a second.

But then curious, puts it back on and walks on a bit. He pauses to lean against a light pole and puts it against it. He hears, "lean on me...." And laughs and begins to look around.

He places the stethoscope on the hood of the car at the stoplight – and gets the Rolling Stones, "start me up..."

The fire hydrant gives him, "Who let the dogs out..." and he begins to dance a little.

The crosswalk DON'T WALK sign sings "Stop in the name of love..."

The rocks around a city tree give him Simon and Garfunkel, "I am a rock..."

A little dog, a shitzu, gets the stethoscope placed on him and we hear, "Bad to the bone..."

Someone's slurpee sings, "Ice, ice baby..."

Then after a while it seems he's run out of things to listen to, so he stands there on the sidewalk looking right then left, then down and places the stethoscope on his own heart. "The Alleluia Chorus"! The screen fades to black and then we read,

*And the mystery is that **Christ lives in you** and he is your hope of sharing in God's glory. (Colossians 1:27)*

It is quite different to be a disciple of Christ than to simply be a citizen of Rome or of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We rejoice in the Lord, we let our gentleness be known, and we do not worry. **Because when joy becomes a habit; extravagant love becomes a reflex.**

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say Rejoice!
Amen.