

Sunday, January 22, 2023

Rev. Robert W. Brown
The Wonder of This Place
Philippians 1:3-11

INTRODUCTION

“Come Sing O Church In Joy” Indeed this is a joy filled day for this church. Joy, I think, is one of the primary tells that indicate you are in the presence of holiness. True joy, somehow transcends immediate circumstances, because joy is the condition of your soul and remains as a consistent lifeline that guides you through the ebb & flow of life’s peaks and valleys. The Apostle Paul knew this kind of joy and he stressed its importance throughout his letters to the new, often struggling, start-up churches he established.

The church in Philippi, for example, was clearly one of Paul’s favorites. He writes to them from a prison in Rome to encourage them in the face of Christian persecution that is running rampant across the Roman Empire. With Paul imprisoned in Rome and his beloved church under the empire’s lethal threat, it is easy to imagine that this church was in a time of high anxiety, questioning the viability of their future. Yet, Paul speaks of joy! In chapter 4, for example he writes this:

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 Jesus¹.

Today is my last Sunday with you and along with these words, I found another scripture to be most compelling for all of us because it speaks of that remarkable joy in remembering one another and also the joy that is rooted in God’s faithfulness to us, above and beyond all existential threats.

This is how Paul begins his letter to the Philippians 1:3-11. And this too is my prayer...

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It

¹ Philippians 4:4-7

is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, [and I hold you in mine] for all of you share in God's grace with me.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

PRAYER

God of all that is good and loving, may our joy also be full, even on this day of saying good bye. Fill us all as we trust and follow in the Way of Jesus. May we also become beacons of truth and compassion, enlightening all creation with acts of justice and mercy. And, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of each heart be pleasing and acceptable to you, our ROCK and our REDEEMER. Amen.

SERMON:

Friday, at the *Celebration of Life* we held here to remember the life of our beloved Dot Rand, I was reminded of these words of wisdom, written by the poet Mary Oliver².

*To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

Well, I'm still working on the first two but the third one I carry in my heart. The time has come to let it go. I hope you know this to be true too. The time has come to let it go. As we have said goodbye to one another over these last 3 months, I have felt your sorrow, and more so, your understanding. And, last night, we had a huge celebration! It is time to let it go and make room for what God has in store next, for both TriCon Church and Natalie and me.

² "In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver, from [American Primitive](#). © Back Bay Books, 1983.

13 years ago, I was astonished when God and you affirmed my call to be a pastor at TriCon Church. Honestly, I did not have a clue what I might have to offer you in the way of ministry. I was a newly minted 50+ 2nd career rookie awaiting my first call to ordained ministry. I was convinced that my calling was going to be where I felt most comfortable - out on the margins, walking with the poor, advocating for the homeless, finding Christ among the disinherited. To be honest, I showed up to the interview at TriCon with a severe bias about what a congregational church in Concord Massachusetts would be like. Let's just say I was predisposed to saying, "thank you for your time." But then I met you. I first met people like Russel Sanna and Allene Kussin. Tom Piper, Carol Gupta and Mary Jane Knudson were also there. Liz Haff was chair of the Deacons and I think Elise Woodward was moderator. After being introduced to the Senior Minister, The Rev. Dr. John Lombard, I then met the staff; Karen Lord, Judy Walpole, Amy Bruning, Mary Lou Esposito, and Carrie O'Brien. Finally, I sat down with Nick Bruning and the deal was sealed. I had to admit I was dead wrong about you people and I had to repent. God was clearly calling me to TriCon Church. I still didn't know what I might have to offer you but I knew for certain I wanted to walk alongside this progressive, passionate, dedicated, smart and searching group of questioning believers. And when I met your kids in children's church and youth group... well I fell in love.

I think that my joy in TriCon Church was like Paul's joy in the Philippians. We shared in the gospel from the first day until now. That doesn't mean we understood the gospel, but we sought out its meaning together through study, conversation and, most importantly, through our practice. Throughout this 13-year journey walking with you, there has been this throughline, this thread we clung to that we call faith seeking understanding. I always had the feeling that we were in this together, daring to question, daring to try new avenues of ministry and outreach, engaging the hard questions about our relevance and responsibility to the community outside these walls. We were not afraid to question and discern the path forward. Certainly, there were disagreements, but in the end, (sometimes in triple overtime at the buzzer.) We found consensus. Without a doubt there were challenges, but grace wiggled through. Remember Exodus 2016, when we were displaced from our sanctuary for six-months? But God made a way out of no way and we thrived together, unified by offering our own distinctive gifts. We were eager to support one another in hard times and rejoiced together in what God was doing among us. Why is God so fond of TriCon Church? I have no idea, but She most certainly is! Please don't forget that.

What I do know is that within every single one of us God has breathed in an infinite Love that we call life. We are all connected in this vapor we call life. Yet, flowing through all time, it seems that we are eternally bound by our shared human experience. That connective tissue is the eternal Love. That Love IS God, revealed to me in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Named or unnamed, that is all I have ever wanted to point to in my ministry here. The more we come to understand the inextricability of our connectedness, across religious convictions, political affiliations and baked in bias, the more we will be able to transcend the lies and concocted artificial divisions that seek only to keep us apart and at war with one another.

In defiance of the lie, we seek to be kind, work hard, extend grace and nurture the Love of God in our own hearts to be dispensed freely, with reckless abandon to others. Following in the Way of Jesus, we want to love without condition. Give just a little more than we dare. Live on the edge of our fears. Take risks. Fail. Re-organize. Fail again. Reorganize again. We want to risk everything for the sake of Love. It has been quite a ride with you people!

The poet and Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore wrote this poem that I think captures the essence of how I will always remember TriCon Church.

*My heart sings at the wonder of my place
in this world of light and life;
at the feel in my pulse of the rhythm of creation,
cadenced by the swing of endless time.
I feel the tenderness of the grass in my forest walk;
the wayside flowers startle me:
that the gifts of the infinite are strewn in the dust
wakens my song in wonder.
I have seen, have heard, have lived;
in the depths of the known I have felt
the truth that exceeds all knowledge
which fills my heart with wonder
and I sing.*

Concord's own Henry David Thoreau wrote that "life in us is like water in a river." I'll bet he thought of that one day sitting down by the banks of the Assabet or down by the North Bridge. I couldn't agree more. My favorite

metaphor for God is flowing water, endlessly spilling out from the source, traveling relentlessly over and under the rocks, falling perilously off cliffs, winding around bends, dammed up by beavers and manipulated by humans. Yet, no matter what obstacle may come, the water always finds its way to the ocean, humbly traveling along the path most yielding, only to return again, back to the source and eternal flow. This is the source of our joy; here on earth we get to ride along in that eternal flow for a while. Sometimes we are in the calm flat waters and the next thing we know the rapids take us to where we did not want to go. There are the dry, barren times of trickle and drought and seasons of violent crashing waves, yet, somehow, we are carried through by God's unfailing grace. The point is, we want to do everything we can to stay in the flow of this great mystery and ride through this river of life for all it is worth. The miracle of God with us is plainly before our eyes in this present moment. When we are able to simply submit to the flow of this river of life, we will see that miracle. Oh, what joy! Nothing can stop the eternal flow.

So, I'll leave you with one last story I heard along the banks of the river.

*"As the Master grew old and infirm,
the disciples begged him not to die.
The Master said, 'If I did not go, how would you ever see?'
'What is it we fail to see when you are with us?' they asked.
But the Master would not say.*

*When the moment of his death was near, they said,
'What is it we will see when you are gone?'
With a twinkle in his eye, the Master said,
'All I did [while I was alive] was sit on the riverbank
handing out river water.
After I'm gone, I trust you will notice the river.'"*

Thank you TriCon Church for 13 amazing years. No matter what comes next, the river will flow and I do trust you will notice the river.

But, for now and always, it is well with my soul and my *heart sings at the wonder of this place.*

AMEN.