

Instruments of Joy
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Philippians 4:4-9

This morning, we're gonna talk about the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians – it's a good letter; a great letter! But before we do, we've got to get a handle on a couple of words. Those words are "joy" and "rejoice." What do these words really mean?

Webster's dictionary defines joy as:

- a. the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT

Nah, that doesn't clear it up for me. How about rejoice?

- a. to give joy to; to gladden
- b. to feel great joy or delight

With all due respect to Mr. Webster, I have no idea what this means! I can't visualize it. I can't hold onto it. So today, I thought we might try a little exercise. I have a one-year old daughter, as well as three nieces and five nephews, and if there's anything they've taught me about being a daddy and an uncle, it's that joy can be found at birthday parties – especially when there's cake and ice cream. And even more especially, when there are noisemakers. So I thought that maybe we could use noisemakers to demonstrate what joy sounds like, and what it feels like when we share joy with other people.

(Pass out the noisemakers and have the audience demonstrate joy.)

Okay! So I think we've got a handle on joy. Hang on to that for a few minutes – and hang on to your noisemakers.

So who are these Philippians and why should you and I care about them? Philippi was a city in Northern Greece and was located on one of the major trade routes to Thessalonica. Somewhere between 49-50 CE it became the first community that Paul preached to in Europe. The Philippians immediately took to Paul's teachings – they showed unmatched devotion – and Paul (who could be a pretty cantankerous ole guy at times!) shows them a tenderness he doesn't show to others. There is a deep, mutual respect between the two parties. They love one another.

So fast forward about ten years to around 60 CE, and we find Paul in prison. Scholars debate where he is in prison, but it is probably either Rome or Ephesus or Caesarea. And the situation is not good. Paul is almost certainly awaiting trial for capital punishment. Most likely, his cell was dark and crowded and damp; meals were scarce; he would have been living in filth and excrement.

And life wasn't easy for the members at the Church at Philippi either. They were Gentile converts, constantly ridiculed by their neighbors for living out these strange Christian practices. But they had the courage to endure.

Despite their circumstances, the Philippians want to offer some comfort to their friend Paul. So they send one of their own, a fellow named Epaphroditus, to go see Paul in prison and bring him materials to make a fragrant offering. And wouldn't you know it, Epaphroditus gets deathly ill.

So to recap the scene, the mentor of the Philippians is in prison, their agent is deathly ill, back home church members are getting persecuted, and the church is leaderless. If this were a Country and Western song, you could expect a nice double negative, or a dead dog, or a mama that was about to be run over by a train.

I think the Philippians were expecting the worst from the letter that was coming. In fact, I think these Philippians had already decided they knew what the letter was gonna say. They were bracing themselves to hear Paul say, "All hope is lost!"

But guess what?!? Paul surpasses their wildest expectations. This letter is a letter of joy! The letter is 2,300 words long, and Paul uses the words "joy" or "rejoice" sixteen times. This isn't for lack of vocabulary – Paul wants to emphasize his joy. And he does it from the get-go.

After a short introduction, the letter jumps right to joy...

1:3 – "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in everyone of my prayers for all you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."

Paul tells them that this prison thing ain't so bad. They put me in here, but I'm sharing the gospel message with the imperial guard. And there are even some of my rivals who preach a different kind of gospel just to get under my skin. But what does it matter? The gospel message is still getting preached. Oh and Epaphroditus...he's all better now. I take joy in the fact that God has spared me anymore loss because I don't know how I would have coped. I'm sending him back with this letter, and I'm sending Timothy too because I wanna hear what y'all are up to. I also want to tell you how much I value Timothy's companionship here. If not for him, I don't think I'd have anyone to talk to. I feel certain that God had a hand in that joy. Thanks for the gifts you sent, you really shouldn't have. And while I've got your attention, lemme tell you what to with this thing called joy..."

And that's when we know Paul is still Paul. Take heart and be glad Philippians, Paul is not too banged up or beaten down to still teach you a few things about this God he knows.

And that brings us back to our scripture for today. In my opinion, this is a joyful exhortation on how we should live our lives in the presence of God. But I think it's important for you to experience the joy in this exhortation so that you can fully appreciate and understand it. So here's what we're gonna do. I want everyone to close their eyes. I'm going to reread today's lection, and anytime you hear something that brings you joy, I want you to blow your noisemaker. There isn't a right answer and there isn't a wrong answer. I only ask that you express joy when you hear it. Okay, let's do it.

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.¹

Judging from the amount of noise I just heard, I take it that you hear the joy in this letter, too! So what does this exhortation of joy mean and what do we do with it?

I believe, that through Paul, God is calling each us to be an instrument of joy in this world. So let's trace our steps.

A.H. Snyman characterizes these six verses as "urging the Philippians to live the gospel" via four distinct ways: rejoicing, being gentle, praying, and living moral lives.² One more time for emphasis – we should rejoice, be gentle, pray, and live moral lives. I think you've all demonstrated a thorough capacity to rejoice this morning! Keep doing it!

So let's move quickly to the other three.

Paul says that God is near, so we should be gentle. Other translations (the NIB is one of them) replace *gentle* with the word *magnanimous*, which means "active generosity." I like this word better. It means we don't just simply sit on the sidelines, and it means that we aren't timid in our kindness to others. It means that we can be bold! And what is near? It could mean a spatial nearness or it could reflect Paul's sense of the impending Parousia – in other words Jesus was coming back real quick! I don't think we need to get caught up in debating the way in which God is near. Instead, we should celebrate God's nearness by acting with generosity. We can simply help our neighbors. All of you have been instruments of joy. You do it each week when you share the peace of Christ with one another, or walk in CROP Walk, or serve a meal to homeless neighbors, or when you offer a kind word to your friends or coworkers, or when you simply think of the rights and feelings of others rather your own. You do it when you participate in an economy of dignity. Keep doing it!

Second. Prayer matters. Prayer helps to ease our anxiousness. By praying, we acknowledge a trust and a faith that God will protect our hearts and minds. You've done it this morning. You've been an instrument of joy because you came with an open heart and an open mind and had the courage to lift your concerns to God. Keep doing it!

Third, Paul calls us to live moral lives. Let's go back to verses 8 and 9. Paul isolates six values – this is rhetorical staccato – Paul wants to emphasize each quality and show their collective unity. Listen to verse 8 again – it is a cadence of six quarter notes; each one the clicking heel of a marching cadet:

¹ Philippians 4:4-4:9 NRSV

² A.H. Snyman. *Philippians 4:1-9 From a Rhetorical Perspective*. (2007. <http://www.ntgateway.com/paul-the-apostle/philippians/>), 233

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.

And now that Paul has our attention. He drives the point home in verse 9:

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.³

Paul has called us to contemplate what it means to live a moral life. We're called to think for ourselves, and to ask questions, and to learn, and to act on upon the knowledge we've gained. For those of you who went to Sunday School this morning, or attended Sardis Academy last week, you were following Paul's exhortation. You have been an instrument of joy. You were taking time to reflect on what scriptures and other inspirational literature can tell you about kingdom living. And when you leave here today, you'll think about how to put into practice what you are learning. Keep doing it!

Rejoice! Be gentle. Pray. Live moral lives.

The message of Philippians is still relevant today. In a world full of issues ranging from minor complications of traffic jams and common colds to major challenges like forest fires and earthquakes and the AIDs epidemic, God is STILL vested in us! Christ STILL gives us the strength to be present in the world. Prayer is STILL the proper venue for any and every request. And Paul STILL calls us to REJOICE! We need only to respond in kind.

And so I think I will. (*I blow my noisemaker.*)

How about you?

Amen.

³ Philippians 4:4-4:9 NRSV