

WPC
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Joy in the Journey of Faith
Philippians 4:1-7, 8-23

We've come to the end of our series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians. Last week, we saw how Paul describes his journey of faith using an athletic image: of a runner who forgets what lies behind and presses on toward the prize of the heavenly call of God. This morning, we'll see how Paul addresses a conflict within the Philippian church between two women leaders, Euodia and Syntyche. We can learn a great deal from Paul's strategy of conflict resolution.

Paul starts out by reminding the Philippians how much he loves and cares for them, calling them his joy and crown. There are two Greek words for crown: *diadem*, which is the crown that a king or queen would wear, and *stephanos*, which is the wreath given to the winner of an athletic contest. In keeping with his image of running in a race, Paul uses the word *stephanos*; in effect, he's saying that the Philippians are like his gold medal.

After reaffirming his great love for the Philippians, Paul addresses an argument between two women leaders in the church, Euodia and Syntyche. "We don't know the substance of the quarrel, ...but we can be sure the

dispute was not inconsequential" to rate a mention here (Craddock, 69)

Notice how Paul deals with this issue. First, he doesn't ignore the fact that there's a problem. He faces up to it, even naming names. His goal was not to embarrass these two women by having their names read aloud in worship services for generations. He's simply reminding them that leaders are to be held accountable to the same standards expected of everyone else.

Second, Paul does not take sides. Instead, he appeals for them to go to their deepest common denominator - he tells them to *agree in the Lord*. He doesn't presume to tell the church what to do (after all, he's not even there), but he does tell them to do something, to act constructively in a sensitive and loving manner. Paul expects the church to help with the healing. He reminds the church how important Euodia and Syntyche are, not only to him but also to God - their names are written in the book of life. As another pastor likes to say: "Don't forget they are special children of God - their pictures are in God's wallet (or, in today's thinking, God's iPod), so be careful how you treat them."

Fred Craddock points out that in several ways we are reminded by this brief paragraph that we are reading someone else's mail. First, Paul and the Philippians knew the nature of the quarrel; we do not. Paul and the Philippians also knew the identity of the one called "true yokefellow"; we do

not. Two things, though, we do know: first, that Euodia and Syntyche are loved by God and important to both Paul and the Philippians. Secondly, we know that, for all the bad press Paul has gotten about his attitude toward women, women were visible leaders in churches Paul established, and he considered them to be his associates in ministry.

Facing conflict is never easy. Now we see why Paul twice urges the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord. Dealing with this conflict probably did not put them in a mood to rejoice. But Paul strongly encourages them to rejoice anyway, even if they don't feel like it, because the Lord is near. He tells them, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." In other words, they can be joyful and stay cool under pressure because the Lord is near. We too can relax when we remember that help--our Lord's help--is close at hand.

Paul tells the Philippians they don't have to be anxious, they are not to worry about anything, because the Lord is near them, and the peace of God...will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. " In a striking paradox, Paul describes this peace with a military term: The peace of God 'will stand sentry watch' over your hearts and minds" (Craddock, 72). Because the day of Christ is near and because the peace of God stands guard,

the church can rejoice. Because God's peace is on duty, they do not have to be anxiously scanning the horizon for new threats. Alert, yes; anxious, no.

I believe it was Karl Barth who said that preachers should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That's good advice, but it's also exceedingly challenging. It forces us to deal with the tensions of our faith. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and discouraged when we read news of war, poverty, oppression, disease, drought, and floods. And that's before we even open the newspaper!

But the Apostle Paul reminds us it's important to remember that there is gospel, good news, in the midst of the world's tragedies, and therefore we should not lose hope. In fact, Paul urges us to "rejoice in the Lord always." Then he repeats himself: "Again, I say, rejoice."

I think one reason Paul repeats himself is because he knows how difficult it is to remain joyful in the midst of harsh circumstances. Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from prison. Yet he remains persistent in his faith even as he faces the threat of death.

How does Paul remain steadfast in his courage and faith while maintaining his focus on his ministry in the face of such hard times? Let me offer two reflections.

First, Paul knows from experience that the gospel of Jesus Christ is durable. It's not fragile, it won't wither when faced with life's turbulence. The gospel is tough enough to help us make it in the face of suffering, and therefore he's able to encourage everyone to share in his joy, which is real even in difficult times, when one follows the mind of Christ.

Douglas Oldenburg, Past President of Columbia Theological Seminary, notes that "Paul was in prison, and he had a choice to make. He could have chosen to be bitter, focusing on the negative, all that was wrong with his life, all he had lost, but instead he chose to focus on the positive, on all that was right, on all he still had. I rather imagine his letter to the Philippians is written as much to himself as it was to them.

Being in prison, he had every reason to be depressed, but instead he wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord Always." He had every reason to complain and plead with God about his dire circumstances, but instead he wrote: "...with THANKSGIVING let your requests be known to God." He had every reason to look on the dark side of his circumstance, but instead he wrote: "...whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." He had every reason to give up, but instead he wrote: "I press on... I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Yes, he was writing to himself as much as he was to others.

You see, we are not always free to determine WHAT happens to us, but we are relatively free to choose HOW WE WILL RESPOND to whatever happens. " (Day 1 sermon, 11/24/96)

So on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, I want to remind you of the choice you and I have in every circumstance of life, the same choice Paul had in prison: the choice to be thankful and to rejoice.

The second way Paul is able to remain steadfast in his faith and courage in the midst of difficult circumstances is that Paul always keeps the big picture in mind. He knows that God is sovereign, that God in Jesus Christ has already won the victory over sin and death through his resurrection, and so he knows how the story will end. And once you know how it will all end, it changes your outlook on life. We really can have hope; we truly can rejoice.

I've shared before a story about Jim Wallis that illustrates this point: Back in the days of apartheid in S. Africa, when the majority black population was oppressed by the white minority, Wallis was with Bishop Desmond Tutu as he was plotting a campaign against Pretoria. The rally they had planned had just been canceled by the government, so Tutu said, "Alright, we're going to have church instead. Try to cancel that."

The government didn't cancel their church service, so they had worship at a small cathedral. Outside, the authorities started to gather: there were three times as many police and military outside as there were believers inside. Wearing riot gear and carrying automatic weapons, they were there hoping to intimidate the worshippers. And for Wallis, at least, it was working!

The time came when Tutu was about to give the sermon, and he got behind the pulpit and started to preach, and the S. African security police and soldiers broke down the doors in the back, marched into the church, and lined the walls of the cathedral. They held tape recorders and pads in their hands, and they challenged Tutu: "Be prophetic, be bold, go ahead, we're going to get it down, and put you right back in jail, and this time keep you there." They were challenging the people of God, saying, "We own this place. We own this country, we own your religion, we own you, and we even own your God."

At that point, Tutu stopped preaching and just looked at his Bible; then he slowly looked up at the soldiers, gazing at them side to side, and said, "You're powerful, very powerful, but you're not God, and I serve a God who will not be mocked."

Then he smiled. Deb and I had an opportunity a few years ago to hear Desmond Tutu when he spoke at the Seeds of Compassion event here in Seattle, and we'll never forget that big Desmond Tutu smile. If you've ever seen it, you know what I mean. When he smiles, he literally beams. In fact, he looks a lot like Yoda.

Tutu looked at the soldiers, and he smiled. In fact, he started to laugh at them (but politely, he is a bishop), because he knew how the story ends. He knew who is ultimately victorious. He smiled, and then he said, "So since you have already lost, we invite you today to come and join the winning side." And the place erupted, and young people started chanting and dancing, and the police moved back – they didn't expect dancing, rejoicing worshipers! I don't know if there were any Presbyterians in worship that day, but I guarantee you, if there were, they were dancing, too, even if it was only on the inside. And they moved the soldiers out of the church and into the streets.

Ten years later, Wallis was at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela, a black South African, where Desmond Tutu was the master of ceremonies. It was a huge party for S. Africa. Wallis asked him if he remembered that day, and Tutu smiled. With the eyes of faith, they had been able to see this party ten years before.

That's what faith is – seeing the party before it happens, knowing how it's going to come out. We are the ones who can rejoice always because we are on the winning side. Thanks be to God. Amen.