

Sermon (10/15/17, Philippians 4: 1-9):

I tend to be honest about my emotions. As such, I, like many, find it difficult when someone tells me how I should be feeling.

‘Just be happy!’ They say. To do so when I am sad feels dishonest and, frankly, impossible. ‘Don’t worry!’ They say. How does one just simply shut off worry? ‘Be positive, look on the bright side.’ Is another phrase which is said with the best of intentions but to one who is facing challenging times, it comes across as a frustrating minimization of the woundedness they are struggling with.

At first glance, today’s passage from Philippians puts us on guard as it feels a bit like Paul telling us how we should feel. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.’ He writes. ‘Do not worry about anything.’ Easier said than done.

Upon closer look, however, we sense there is something more going on here. Paul is a deep thinker and not one to overly simplify the complexities of faith as well as the challenges of being human. We need to read Paul’s words with this in mind.

One thing to consider is that Paul is writing this letter from prison. It’s absolutely stunning to read these words knowing this fact. He has been deemed an enemy of the state and he is fully aware that his execution might happen at any moment. Yet, amazingly, he has somehow found a place of sincere peace, enabling him to speak with bold confidence. We can sense in his words that there are no false airs when it comes to Paul’s urging to rejoice. It is an emotion he has somehow been able to latch onto himself even in the frightening place he is in.

Paul is also very concerned about those who are a part of the church in Philippi. Even as his own demise looms large, his concern is focused more on the church of Christ than on his own personal safety. It’s a strong reminder, I think, of the importance Paul places on the community of Christ. For Paul, the church community is not a superfluous thing to be taken for granted. It’s not something meant to be easily dismissed and discarded when the going gets tough. It requires our constant care, love, support, dedication, and sacrifice in order to make it work. Jesus has given us the tools and even promises to be there to guide and help us but our role

in using those tools to nurture its well-being is critical.

There is much we do not know about the circumstances of the church in Philippi since we are reading someone else's mail but it's safe to assume that the cohesion and well-being of the church is in jeopardy.

From without, the church is under attack by the cultural forces of the day. Cultural forces such as competitive quests for honor and power, hierarchical social relationships, and political and economic pressures. Sound familiar? Apparently, as much as things change, there are some things that stay the same.

Inwardly, there is some sort of nasty battle taking place between two major leaders of the church, Euodia and Syntyche. We don't know what this battle is about but we do know that it has been noticed by Paul and it has him concerned. It is, clearly, no small matter.

Church battles, messy church, strained relationships – wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, you can pretty much count on these dynamics. Why? Because churches are made up of human beings and they reflect all the flaws and imperfections that are a part of our humanity. We disagree. We hold grudges. We are prone to see the speck in the neighbor's eye while missing the log in our own.

The battle stressing the Philippian church seems to be between two people. It reminds us that such battles take their toll. Gossip and behind the scenes degradation of another or a group of others are no small matter. Learning how to handle them in a constructive and careful manner is essential to the community though far from easy.

Paul begins by reminding the church of all the good these two people have done. 'Remember, how precious these people are. Remember how they struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.'

There are no throw-a-ways in the faith community. Paul reminds us in another letter that when one part of the body hurts, the whole-body hurts. Paul calls upon the church to help Euodia and Syntyche fix whatever it is that has caused this tension. He instructs the church to seek ways to return to a place of covenantal love in the community. There are no throw-a-ways.

Following his instructions to the church to help Euodia and Syntyche,

Paul then tells them to rejoice and not worry. As I mentioned before, easier said than done. But given Paul's circumstances and given Paul's nature, we are pushed to explore the deeper lessons he is trying to convey. This is more than just an attitude adjustment prescription. Rejoicing is not being implored just for rejoicing's sake. He is not ordering us to turn our worries off like a light switch. Rejoicing comes as a by-product when we pay close attention to the fact that, yes, even now, even in the most unlikely of circumstances, 'the Lord is near', as Paul puts it.

'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.' And what these things are that Paul has revealed in his life is a constant, disciplined, and hard-fought fight to stay so connected to God and, as part of that, the community of God that one can't help but to see that the Lord is near.

I was once asked what it is that encourages me and gives me hope as a Minister. Thinking that through I realized it wasn't the big, ostentatious evidences of success like the world tends to rely on but it was the small things.

For instance, the bulletin board at the Christian Education building where the Sunshine Daycare children hang their art projects from the latest children and worship story they've heard. The most recent version is a fleet of Noah's Arks filled with all kinds of animals and dinosaurs. We worked so hard to incorporate the Children and Worship program into that curriculum. The joy of seeing the fruits of our labors on that bulletin board is indescribable. Clearly God is near and, as a result, I couldn't help but to feel a sense of rejoicing.

I received a phone call from a person I had never met asking to have his child baptized. After thirty years of being a Pastor, my response was sadly jaded. I've had a lot of requests like this over the years from folks having little interest in the church and little interest in being a part of the church community. They make all kinds of promises and then once the baptism is done, we never see them again and, as a result, we are deprived of the opportunity to live out our baptismal vows much like the church was being called to do for Euodia and Syntyche.

I agreed to meet with this person. Almost immediately I found

myself regretting my negative and suspicious thoughts. This person could not have been more sincere in his desire not only to have his child baptized but to be baptized himself. He told me a story that cut deep into my heart. This person eagerly desired a deeper connection with God and God's people. This was a baptism request at its best. I begged for God's forgiveness for having such a negative initial reaction because, as it turned out, I found this moment to be just the opposite. A profound testimony that God is near, and as a result, rejoicing – genuine, heartfelt, overwhelming rejoicing - washed over me like the waters that would soon wash over him and his child.

This week, in preparation for today's service, I filled out ten new member certificates. For each one, I thought about the person whose name I was putting on the certificate and, once again, I found myself sensing the sure and certain evidence that God is near, doing amazing things even in these troubling and challenging times the Christian church is in. Again, I couldn't help but to feel a sense of rejoicing – real, unpretentious rejoicing.

These are just a few examples of the kind of things I think Paul was eluding to in his appeal for us to rejoice. God is near but sometimes it's so very difficult to see, which is part of the reason why the church community is so important. It takes many eyes to see the hand of the divine in these days filled with so many distractions and burdens. Yet, in and through our times of worshipping together and in and through those 'aha' moments in our studying and praying together we find our eyesight sharpened as the nearness of God comes into focus and, soon, very soon, our voice can't help but to join Paul's echo declaring, *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice.*

To God alone be all the glory.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, we give you thanks this day for gathering us in this place to remind us you are near. We confess the many times when our lives are so filled with distractions that we find it difficult to see you. Yet, in so many ways, your divine hand continues to be present in our lives, in this place, in what we do, and in the blessings that rise up even from the ashes of our messes and failings.

Be with your church, O God. Help us to see and understand the preciousness of this community. Enable us to be a place where each person is valued as you value us. Create in us a passion to never take this gift and calling for granted. We especially thank you this day for our newest members who have become a part of our life and ministry here. By their presence, our lives have been enriched and our hope renewed even as we rejoice in you always.

Lift us, we pray, above the din of our despair and frustration so that we might embrace the good news of what it means to be your people. Open our eyes to the small things that bear testimony to the amazing tale of your grace unleashed. Grab hold of hearts as we listen to each other's stories, bearing witness to your saving work among us. Galvanize us to be your people so that we might reveal to those around us that what we do here is no small thing but is, indeed, the very salvation that creation yearns for.

We pray this even as we lift to you the many concerns that weigh heavy on our thoughts – the people of Puerto Rico, Florida, and the South West as they recover from the ravages of storms; the people of the far west suffering from severe fires that are destroying their neighborhoods and homes; those who are sick, discouraged, frightened, alone, hungry, thirsty, homeless,

and grieving. We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now boldly name in our silence or aloud....

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.