

REJOICE, GIVE THANKS! HOW?

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Friday, November 22, 2019

Scripture: [Philippians 4:4–9](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today's scripture may be one of the most used readings from our early Christian letters. It is a classic, written from the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi. A church he helped found, and that he deeply loves. The letter is a celebration of—and an invitation to—Christian community and relationship.

I have spent a lot of time with it, and important time at that. It was one of my favorite texts in seminary... and this section today was read as a lesson at my wedding by a dear friend. It has his voice for me. I wonder, if you think on it, whose voice you might hear it in.

Here at the end, Paul offers encouragement in all things, and the invitation to ground the church, and us still today in a practice of reflection and renewal.

SERMON

When in doubt, I try and look for what the scriptures are trying to tell me, because I guess that's a good way to start in figuring out what to tell you.

I started right at the beginning. Rejoice always.

Good start. I pondered for a little while how I would figure out what rejoicing looked like for me, versus, you know, being mildly pleased, or very happy, or maybe something more in the verb category: how do I know when I have rejoiced versus celebrated? Or maybe reveled?

Then I got distracted and read the news for a little while. Then I stopped trying to rejoice.

I wondered how I could in the face of so much... In Hong Kong, in Venezuela, in Syria, in D.C... All so much that felt like it weighed me down, maybe even because I was looking for Jesus there... or maybe even more, wondering what on earth Jesus would have me do with all this.

I don't know if you ever find yourself in those times, but if you do, I hope you know you aren't alone. I also hope you know that if you hit a season of your life when you find you're feeling hopeless, you know that we can talk, and that you know I support you in finding someone you can talk to, and treatment that can help.

I was reminded that I'm not the only one that has struggled in this...

...I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity. I am certain there must be a patent American article on the market which will suit you far better, but I can't give any advice on it.
[\[1\]](#)

Nice dig there, C.S.

We do love to just get on with it and throw a party.

We always need the reminder that this whole letter to the Philippians was written by a man in prison.

This is not some sort of positive thinking mantra. This is not some invitation to imitation of a life scrubbed clean of any mess or imperfection or pain... this is a reminder to rejoice not because everything is right... but because things are wrong... and God is with us. "The Lord is near." Paul reminds us. And somewhere else he asked, "if God is with us what can stand against us?"

God is with us, and Jesus tells us he has come so that we might have "joy, and have it abundantly." Not to mention the fact that Jesus *invited* people into his life and ministry... and I suspect you will find that very few people want to come to a party that doesn't have any joy. (I sometimes need to remind myself, and maybe some other pastors this.)

And so we are told by Paul to come back again and again in prayer and thanksgiving.

One of the deepest sources of meditation and joy we can connect to is to pause long enough to understand exactly how much of our lives is a gift.

- The relationships we have... most of them, other than your employer, you have not had to *earn* per se... or at least I hope it has not felt that way.
- The successes we have had have been a complicated stew of work, yes, but also of pure gift of relationship and family, happenstance, kindness of others, and beyond... of skills and interests which arose in us as part of the miracle of who we are.

- The very reality of life itself is, a gift. There has not been, nor will there be again, an experience quite like the one we are all having right now.

We mine joy from our lives by thinking on the things that Paul invites us to meditate on today:

- What is honorable.
- What is just.
- What is pure.
- What is pleasing.
- What is commendable.
- What is excellent and worthy of praise.

Many Sundays here, I invite you to share the joys of your life with one another. You've been doing that since before I came to minster here... and, I have to admit, when I first heard about this, I wasn't sure if I really "got" this piece of our liturgy. Then, of course, I came and worshipped with you, and I found the thing that I say often here: they nourish us all.

What nourishment of the spirit, what rejoicing, what thanksgiving would you share today? **Call them out.**

The joys of your life, I'm glad that we give you a chance to share them here... It's wonderful to see you, even you introverts, occasionally come to worship absolutely bursting at the seams with some good news. But the joys you share, they're not just for you... they are glimpses of what God is doing in the world... of the gifts of the Spirit. I say all the time that joys shared is in some way *our daily bread*... and just like the Lord's Prayer, they have a taste of that Kingdom which we pray comes from God. It opens our hearts and our imagination's to God's new realm here.

The gifts we bless today, we bless because they empower us to share the joy and love of God which we find here over and over again, with a world that can so easily fall into hopelessness. If I haven't said it enough in the last few weeks, THANK YOU. And if you'd like to still make a gift, we're not closing down the gratitude campaign ever. The gifts we share here matter, and they have impacts all around us.

See, we are invited to think on these things, not to blind ourselves the brokenness and pain of the world, but to give thanks to God for the ability to imagine the world as it should be. To find the possibility of the kingdom of God already present in our lives, and to commit ourselves to spreading that possibility into reality.

We are invited to rejoice and give thanks in this life not because there are no death dealing powers and injustice, but because pure gratitude and celebration of true life makes a mockery of death... and connects us to the resurrection which defeated them.

There's a song that I used to sing when I was deeply pained... it has a line:

*Don't ever be embarrassed by your trouble with living,
'cause it's ones with the sorest throats who have done the most singing.* ^[2]

You must, you must, again I say, you must not lose that imagination, and you must never stop rejoicing in the glimpses and glimmers of its hope for the world made new by the presence and promises of God.

God is near. Near to us as breathing. Near to us as the joy that your neighbor may be carrying. Near as the joy you might be keeping to yourself... share them with rejoicing and thanksgiving... they may be what sparks the transformation that God has been calling for all along. Amen.

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1. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*. (U.S. : Eerdmans, 2014.) ↩
 2. Oberst, Connor. *Laura Laurent*. 2002. ↩