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October 15, 2023

In A World Like This....
Philippians 4:1-8

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Exhortations

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,^[a] help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my coworkers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice^[b] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.^[c] ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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^[d] these things.

The ***news about the war in Israel*** is heartbreaking.

Actually, it's worse than that—

The ***horror is unspeakable***.

The ***suffering of innocent people*** is almost unimaginable.

Today I was ***going to preach Matthew 22:1-14 about the wedding banquet*** and the King who got very angry and violent when people refused the invitation, and more so when someone came without a wedding garment.

It's a fascinating story, with a specific historical context that can help make it more understandable.

But I thought with all that is going on in our world right now,
That we needed to hear ***God's words of hope and promise***—
So we are turning to Philippians 4, the epistle reading for today.

I know that you can watch bad news at home, any time, day or night.
And it's important to ***know what's happening*** in the world.

We need to lament what's happening in the world.
 But as you come to worship today,
 I want you to also hear good news.
 I want you to receive hope, in the middle of all this suffering.
 I want you to consider how God can even bring us **JOY right now**.

Now, just in case you were wondering, this is **NOT a Pollyanna sermon**.
 And the **Apostle Paul** was not a Pollyanna—
 you know, one of those annoying people who sees everything as **bright and sunny**.
 The people who end every text with 15 smiling emojis at the end.
 The person who says “Don’t worry, it will all work out the way it’s supposed to”
 Or “Happiness is a choice!”
 Or “Just smile!” “Be happy!”

We know that telling a **depressed or grieving person** to be happy is cruel.
 And telling someone on the verge of a **panic attack** to not worry is mean.
 And telling us to just **rejoice, and again rejoice**—
 when this war and more is raging and destroying human life, is crazy.

Paul is not doing any of that.
 Paul is NOT a Pollyanna.
 In fact, Paul is a **tried and true realist**.

Paul himself had a **severe disability**—he called it a **‘thorn in the flesh’**,
 And we don’t know what it was, but he suffered with it.
 Paul had also been rejected, beaten, shipwrecked,
 and was writing this letter to the Philippians from **prison**,
 where he would likely end up **executed!**

Can you even imagine?
 And this is a letter about **JOY!**
 Paul’s own joy comes from **something deep**—definitely not from his
 circumstances, because his life, by all accounts,
 is difficult, heartbreaking, and frustrating.
 It’s **horrible on the outside**, but somehow, there is this **deep joy, on the inside**.

Have YOU ever **experienced** this?
 We know this **paradox**, don’t we?
 That suffering and joy can **coexist** in the same time, place, and life?
 That suffering CAN even **lead to joy?**

I believe this, deep in my soul.

I am a very optimistic person.

I love to laugh and smile, I believe joy is contagious and good for the soul.

But my joy doesn't come from a great life.

I'm human, just like everyone else.

I have a ***dysfunctional family***, with a lot of loss and heartbreak.

I have ***physical problems***, thorns in the flesh that I wish God would take away.

I have endured many ***difficult days and years***,

when I felt like I was hanging on by a thread.

And I've ***walked with dozens of people*** through their own tragedies over the past 24 years of ministry, in the church and several years in the fire department.

And all of that ***can break you***.

It can make you ***pessimistic, cynical, depressed***—I could be all of those things.

But by the grace of God, I'm not.

And I believe that ***deep sorrow can lead to even deeper joy***.

Nathan Eddy says that

“Joy always takes root amid adversity; there is no other soil for it to grow in”.

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4. pg. 163

Joy itself is ***profoundly ‘countercultural’*** right now.

If we see media of any type,

we see stories about evil, pain, and suffering.

We ***rarely see good news***.

Or stories that bring joy.

So here in worship, let's think about some of the good.

Something joyful, in the midst of all this pain.

Speaking of joy in the midst of pain---

do you realize that the ***context*** of Paul's words about rejoicing (a Greek word that means joy) is an ***argument in the church?***

Between two women leaders?

Paul wasn't writing to people who were all happy and content!

He was writing to a church with some trouble brewing!

And it might sound a bit ridiculous for Paul to *command them to rejoice*— I mean can you imagine telling two siblings who are fighting to ‘stop and rejoice!’.

Paul knows that all is not well in the Philippian church, So he writes to them, *NOT a ‘don’t worry be happy’ kind of letter*, But a *realistic letter, full of real and meaningful words of hope*. A kind of *pathway to joy*.

Debie Thomas, who writes the blog *Journey with Jesus*, says that joy requires us to *AVOID both cynicism and sentimentality*, while we hold *2 very different realities* together: The world’s *brokenness* AND God’s *love*. The world as *it is* AND the world that *we long for*.

Joy happens, she says, when *God BRIDGES that gap*. So joy is like a *posture* for us in life, a *perspective*, a coming together of things that seem opposite. *Joy and suffering*— can and do go together.

Thomas suggests that Paul’s words are *NOT about ‘happiness’*. Happiness is a *good feeling, based on good circumstances*. Paul’s words are not about good feelings, but about *cultivating our souls*.

The truth is, we can’t *create or conjure up joy*, because joy is a *gift from God*. But--we can *pursue spiritual practices* to cultivate our hearts, So that joy can be found there. Those practices include *prayer, supplication, gentleness, and contemplation*.

Paul tells us to: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!* *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

Prayer is intimately connected with joy— because prayer is a relationship with God, and *God is the author of joy!*

Paul tells us to be *gentle*: *Let your gentleness be known to everyone.*

When was the last time we tried gentleness?

And Paul tells us to ***contemplate the good***: *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^d these things.*

What are you thinking most about these days?

What if these ***spiritual practices*** are keys to finding joy?

And there's a dimension to this joy that is so important.

Paul didn't write this for individuals.

We do ourselves a disservice when we read his letters and think they just apply to each one of us individually.

Paul was writing to a ***church—a community—a family of faith***, likely gathered in someone's home.

And he was writing to a real church—with ***real problems***.

And we know from reading Philippians that one of the real problems in Philippi was disunity.

A conflict.

In fact, in this passage Paul points out that ***Euodia and Syntyche are quarreling***, and he urges them to be of the same mind, and he urges the church to help them reconcile!

Wow.

Can you imagine how those women felt listening to this letter?

They were likely avoiding each other at worship, maybe sitting far apart, or arriving at different times.

And Paul urges them to come together.

That's the ***context for his words about rejoicing, prayer, and joy!***

Author Kathleen Norris wrote a great book about faith years ago, called *Amazing Grace*.

In that book she says that ***if it is a gathering of like-minded individuals you're looking for, then you should join a political party, not a church.***

Because in a church what you have is a group of wildly diverse people who share in common mostly just their ***faith***.

Such faith may be the most important thing in the world, but it's not always enough to head off the kinds of conflicts and disputes

that can so often make life in a congregation difficult.

Life happens.

Even in church.

We're a bunch of human beings, imperfect, in need of God's grace.

But we can *pursue things that help us find joy* as a church!

Things like praise.

And prayer.

Gentleness.

And avoiding anxiety.

And Meditating on the good.

How can we ***GROW in these spiritual practices*** at FPC Matawan?

I don't know about you, but I want our ***church to be a place of JOY.***

Of rejoicing, and praise.

A place where we can find hope, peace,

and the power we need to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

How are we doing in this area?

Nathan Eddy writes that ***Joy is the sign of the presence of Jesus*** in church, kind of like the flag that flies at Buckingham Palace to let the people know that the King is in residence there.

Isn't that a neat image?

Do people know that there is JOY inside this church?

Are we sharing that good news?

What if we ***accepted Paul's invitation to rejoice?***

What if, just for a moment, we set aside the news of war,

And our own fears, concerns, pain, and suffering—

and we spent a few moments in pure joyful praise?

What reason do we have to praise today?

What about the ***love of God*** that comes to us in Jesus?

What about the ***grace of God***, enabling us to start over again?

What about ***prayers that have been answered?***

What about ***gifts*** that we have received?

Close your eyes and think about some of those blessings.....

What if we did that for a *few minutes today*?

And then a few minutes tomorrow?

Then even more the next week, the next week, and next month?

What if we *accepted Paul's invitation to rejoice—as a church community*?

How can we *rejoice together*?

How can we cultivate even more *fellowship and friendship*?

How can we show *gratitude* for one another,
and for God who supplies all good things?

Are we *thanking* each another?

Are we *celebrating* answered prayers?

Are we *encouraging and supporting* one another?

Are we *acting like beloved children* of God, and treating one another as such?

Close your eyes and think about how we can rejoice—together....

We have been *invited to rejoice*.

Because the Lord is near.

We have been invited to *accept the peace of God*, which passes all understanding.

We have been invited to *be gentle*,

To pray about everything in prayer and supplication,

To not worry.

And *to think about all good things*.

I urge you this week, *don't watch TOO MUCH news*.

Don't let it overwhelm you.

You know what is good for you, and what will send you over the edge.

Listen to your heart.

We want to be informed, we want to lament,

but we also want to be whole enough to *work for the gospel* in this world.

We want some *peace in our hearts*, so that we might be peacemakers.

If we are to pour out God's love and peace,

We need to be *filled with that love and peace*, in the midst of all the pain.

Friends, you have heard *the Good News of the Gospel*,

Now go from this place and live in it.

And for that gospel, all God's people can say together, Amen.