

Philippians 4:1-9 Pastor Bill Uetrict 10/8/20 Pentecost 19

There are many things I appreciate about my grandson Liam, but probably what I like the best about him is that generally he lives life with a great deal of joy. He likes fun and laughs a lot. Last week when we watched the church's online "Holy-Moly" experience, he couldn't quit laughing about the puppets and the way that the puppeteers were attempting to make them come alive. He gets a big kick out of saying words in unusual ways. He thinks it's funny when I say, quoting my southern Ohio Mom, "shar" when I mean "shower." "I am going to go take a shar." He likes Goofy's rendition of "garsh," and used to laugh greatly when I would quote Godspell: "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever hoyed (heard)."

When I am with Liam, I am reminded of how much joy is wrung out of adults, how little we really laugh, how seriously we take so much of life. In the faith community, we can be particularly guilty of this. For some reason, many of us Christians have been taught that this faith stuff is meant for the serious, even the dour, meaning that far too often we miss the fun and funny parts of the Bible and the Christian journey. William Loader says that "sometimes our distaste for excess leads to a neglect of joy, [a very vital part of the human experience.]" You know, if we get too happy, we might get carried away.

During Covid, and yes, the election season, and yes, the season of the riots, and yes, the seasons of hurricanes and fires, joy has done its best to attempt to evade me. It all seems so serious, and it is. Yet, I have sensed it knocking it my door often, even in the midst of these days. But frequently, I have been reluctant to open the door.

Paul in today's reading from Philippians is inviting his first readers and us into joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always," he says. And he is so adamant that he reiterates his imperative: "Again, I will say, rejoice." Truthfully, the word that he is using is often a word utilized to conclude

a letter. It's a way of saying, "Farewell!" Farewell, rejoice. Perhaps they can be used interchangeably. Isn't it cool that the farewell message is "rejoice"?

Note this. This farewell message of rejoicing is something that Paul writes while he is in prison. He's in the slammer when he is addressing the Philippians, which you might think would prevent him from focusing on joy. Last time I checked prison life wasn't overly joyful. It's the kind of place that could lead to deep depression and despair. And yet Paul says, "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice!"

Obviously, Paul likes these Philippians that he is addressing. He calls them brothers and sisters, people for whom he longs. They are his joy and his crown. Now frankly, Paul more than likely wants something from this community—a generous offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Perhaps he is trying to butter up the Philippians. But still, it's obvious: he has great affection for this community. They've struggled "beside [him] in the work of the gospel." By the way, included in the *they*, is a group of women, some of whom he is addressing today, asking them to live in unity. The early church clearly had many women leaders, something that might have been a reason for their being marginalized.

Joy, even in the midst of the harshness of imprisonment, flows from Paul to the Philippians in part, I am sure, because of the intimacy that he shares with them. Their fellowship, their being in this together, brings him great joy and probably sustains him while he is experiencing something that is not at all pleasant.

There is joy in being connected, in sharing life and ministry together. For me, this kind of joy is some of the greatest joy I know. Life lived in *koinonia*, in fellowship can bring joy even in the midst of the toughest times. By the end of this week, I will have performed 20 funerals or memorial services, since the end of March, when the pandemic began. These have been raw and ugly days for me and for

many of you. Yet still in the midst of the rawness and the ugliness there is and has been a joy that pokes its head out, trying to grasp my attention. In the midst of the shadow of the valley of death, resurrection has been trying to shed light on the valley. Obviously, I have gathered with a plethora of families during these days, and while we shed many tears, we also laughed. Death cannot take away the life of life itself. Laughter, while sometimes a way of covering up pain, also can be a sign of the joy of the resurrection.

I sense that in the crazy story that we heard in our gospel lesson for today we are receiving a major critique from Matthew of the religious leaders of his time who just can't find joy. And I have to be honest with you sometimes it feels as if Matthew can't find much joy. Sometimes he seems a bit crabby himself, causing us many times to weep and gnash our teeth. I think this crabbiness is due in part because Matthew is dealing with some intra-family conflict—a topic that would be worth preaching on, frankly. He is a Jewish Christian who is struggling with other Jews who aren't coming aboard the Jesus train.

This parable he tells about a king who throws a big party, only to have the invitees not show up for the party, is a story that I think is addressing Matthew's community. The religious leaders of Matthew's day aren't responding to the new thing that is happening through the death and resurrection of Jesus. They aren't coming to the party. They aren't experiencing the joy. In fact, they are kill-joys. They put to death the source of joy, and they are still crucifying it, rejecting it.

So, we are told in the story: the king, who won't take rejection as the final word, invites a lot of other people to his big party, the good and the bad. This party isn't about moralism, in other words. This party includes the folks who have made mistakes, as well as those who haven't. This is a party of joy, and the only thing that is required is that you come to it, that you place yourself in its joy.

Now I have to admit the ending of the story is more than a bit weird. We are told that loads of people who weren't necessarily expecting to come to a party are brought into the party and yet one of them is condemned because he's not wearing a tuxedo. Well, when he went off to work, he wasn't expecting to be eating shrimp and filet mignon at the king's palace in the afternoon. So, you got to feel a little sorry for him. What's going on here? I am not certain. But again, I think Matthew is dealing with his own community—a community that might have included some folks who had *some* interest in this Jesus' story but probably were sitting on the fence; they weren't really getting into it. They weren't really partying. Maybe their "distaste for excess" was preventing them from entering fully into the joy, from putting on the wedding clothes.

It's a party that God is throwing. Isaiah tells us that it is going to be a big party when all is said and done—a party of the finest food and drink for all nations. We now are living in the midst of the party of grace, and are waiting for its fulfillment. Life at its deepest, as hard as this is to trust right now, is an experience of food-eating, wine-drinking party joy.

Yet, there is so much that gets in our way of knowing that and trusting it. And truthfully, I get it. These are very hard days to be joyful. Seriousness and dourness are calling out our names. You know: we've got to be vigilant. We need to do all of this right. Our opinions need to be heard. If we don't do, it won't be done. And we might not be totally wrong. These are serious days that require serious, well thought out responses.

But I am sure Paul's days were serious, too. Yet listen to the advice he gives to the Philippians: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." Gentleness can only come when it's not all up to you, when the seriousness of life is penetrated by a joy that

recognizes the nearness of the Lord. If life is all about you and your getting it all right, gentleness will be lost and joy will forever evade you.

There's a big party going on. The *king* is throwing it. Accept the invitation, for heaven sake. Get in there with others and experience the great joy that comes from being in this together. Eat, drink, and dance (in a socially distant manner, of course)!