

The Joy of Being Church 6: *Joy in Giving*

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from the pulpit of
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Psalm 111

¹Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ²Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. ³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. ⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Philippians 4:10-20

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. ¹⁵You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

I imagine all of us know people who can write the perfect Thank You Note. Whether it's for a gift or dinner or special occasion, they know just what to say, and the note always comes in a timely fashion. We have one friend whose *thank you's* for a meal at our home, arrive by U.S. Postal Service, before we've unloaded the dishwasher. The card itself and the handwriting within denote the beauty of the evening; each detail described with a perfectly matching superlative. This friend can make left-over chili on a Sunday night sound like the banquet feast of heaven. There is an art to writing a good Thank You note.

Our scripture reading, on the other hand, is about the worst example of saying Thank You, ever. If you want to learn how to write the perfect thank you, do not look to Paul for instruction. He just doesn't know how to do it. To understand this strange and awkward note, we recall that it was a gift and visit from a church friend which inspired the letter. The Philippian Christians had sent a gift of money to help Paul meet his basic needs – and for them it was an immense sacrifice evidently. Remember that the Roman government provided nothing for a person in prison awaiting trial. A prisoner had to depend on family or friends to show up with food, clothes, or blankets. Epaphroditus arrived with what Paul needed, bringing money and provisions, presumably pen, ink and papyrus paper which Paul would have deemed of more value than food or clothing.¹

So, Paul writes back to the congregation, likely while Epaphroditus waits nearby, in order to return with a word for the church from the Apostle. Paul begins with greetings in the classic form of a letter, but then writes an entire sermon before getting around to *thank you* for the gift. Paul waits to say *Thanks* until the end, and when he finally says it, he's kind of rude. He begins, *at last you revived your concern* for me. That's a way of saying, it's about time you remembered me! Then Paul offers them an excuse for their delay: Well... maybe you had no

¹ Patrick Johnson, "The Best/Worst Thank You Note Ever," First Presbyterian, Asheville, 11/21/22.

opportunity to show your concern before now... And then it gets worse! “I’m not referring to being in need” which means, I really didn’t need your money anyway. I’ve learned to be content with whatever I have - even when I have nothing, am hungry or in real need... In any case it was kind of you to share with me.

Why does Paul find saying, *thanks* for the Money, carried all the way to his prison cell from far away, so difficult? The only way to understand this is to consider the larger context of the volume of his letters. Paul never let churches give to him personally very easily. He was not the kind of evangelist who encouraged folks to slip a few dollar bills into his pocket as he came and went. To the contrary, Paul spent his energy and risked his life raising money for the poorest churches where people were struggling to survive. He tells the wealthier Corinthians, for example, of the success of his campaign among the more modest churches in Macedonia, to support the poorest of the poor who were back in Jerusalem. That’s where he said, *the point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*²

Paul sees all giving as an act of faith, born of deep gratitude for God’s gifts of life itself, to which we respond by building up the church for its mission in the world. What’s that mission? We’ve been attending to how Paul describes it for weeks. To proclaim Jesus Christ as our strength and our song. To serve one another, especially those whose human dignity has been stripped away by the violent ways of the world, by political oppression, by economic disparity. Just last week, we heard Paul’s words of encouragement – calling people of faith to focus our lives on what is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is commendable, and in so doing, we spread the peace of God. So, when Paul turns the page to

² 2 Corinthians 8.

say, “Thanks for the money you sent me,” his awkwardness in talking about money is because it’s never been about him.

Every act of giving is intended to further the work of God in the world. How does Paul say it? Your gifts are *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*. There in, Paul finds his ultimate joy.

Poet David Whyte describes what Paul means when he writes: “Joy is the act of giving ourselves away before we need to or are asked to. Joy is practiced generosity. Joy is a deep form of love... To feel a full and untrammled joy is to have become fully generous;” Whyte goes on, “to allow ourselves to be joyful is to have walked through the doorway of fear, dropping away of the anxious worried self... joy is ultimately a giving of self away.”³

That is why Paul had a hard time saying thanks for the gift he was given. He was accustomed to pushing his anxious worried self out of the way, so that he could give himself over to the good purposes of God. He was accustomed to preaching free of charge... He wanted his life to be so bound up in the life of Christ, even to the point of death, that he would have no other need. And in a very practical way, Paul also knew that talk of money in the church is a very complex matter. Some people have it and some people don’t. Some people need more help than others. Some folks are generous and others are anxious. Some give out of compulsion; but all of us are called to give out of gratitude. What Paul wants us to see is that the gift is not as significant as the posture of the givers, the deep gratitude and joy we find in the abundant gifts of God – which lead to our generosity. Their growing in the Christian faith mattered more to Paul than any monetary amount. *Offerings that are fragrant and pleasing to God*, according to Paul, are first and foremost born of a spiritual resurrection, a devotion to God, a willingness to stake your life on Jesus Christ above all other claims, and only then to respond to God’s goodness with rejoicing.

³ David Whyte, *Consolations*.

Biblical scholar and extraordinary preacher, Fred Craddock, studied this Letter for years in order to write a commentary on Philippians, and said he finally figured out Paul's secret of being content under the worst of circumstances. Despite the prison bars which locked him in, what set him free was one fundamental thing in his relationship with God – gratitude. Fred Craddock put it this way: “I have never known a person grateful, who was at the same time small, or mean, or bitter, or greedy, or selfish, or who took any pleasure in anybody else's pain. Never.”⁴ Growth in gratitude is what leads to generosity!

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-intervention and rehabilitation program anywhere. He works in the danger zones of Los Angeles, helping violent and rival gang members recover a sense of human worth that is not defined by the number of people they've killed; a sense of dignity that is measured by gentleness and not cruelty; a sense of community that is measured in kinship and friendship rather than hatred and division. He has described gang violence in a way that is helpful now I think as we try to wrap our minds around the horror we see in Gaza and in Israel. Father Boyle says, “Gang violence is about the lethal absence of hope.”

Violence is about the lethal absence of hope. Therefore, in order to recover hope his ministry helps gang members find employment. Because employment, of course, provides resources for basic human life - shelter, food, clothing, dignity, human flourishing. Father Boyle was asked in an interview how the lessons he's learned from his work of easing the tensions and helping young people move out of desperately violent gang warfare could be applied to the church and larger society. He was asked: Could you help us get out of our mutual moral outrage and us-versus-them ways of ordering our lives? This tireless, self-sacrificing, Apostle-Paul kind of religious leader said this: “The mark of an authentic disciple is joy, gratitude and bravery. You can easily identify what lurks underneath most things by identifying fear and

⁴ Fred Craddock, “A Note of Thanks,” *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, p.251.

sadness... But if discipleship is joyful, grateful, and if it's brave, taking seriously what Jesus took seriously – inclusion, nonviolence, unconditional loving-kindness, and compassionate acceptance – if it does all that stuff, then it stays close to the marrow of the Gospel.”⁵

Friends, genuine discipleship is never afraid, it's joyful, grateful, and brave. That may not seem like much in the face of the warring rage we are seeing today in Israel and Gaza; or in the temporarily pushed-to-the-side war in Ukraine. It may not seem like much at the moment in this country when gunfire has just become the leading cause of childhood death in the United States. Not cancer, not accident, but gunfire. We are living in extraordinarily chaotic and violent times, but not any more so than when the Roman Empire marched across all the land that stretched far from the Mediterranean Sea – including the land where Jesus walked and where Paul helped build up churches, which is land exploding in violence and human suffering today. But the word from Paul is the word we so desperately need to hear and to act upon.

To God who gives us life, we respond in gratitude. We find joy by giving ourselves back to God, by investing in the brave work of the Gospel: By acts of inclusion, nonviolence, unconditional loving-kindness, and compassionate acceptance. It's the way of Paul; it's the lifeblood of the church; It's the call of Christ. It's our offering – *a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*

AMEN.

⁵ Boyle story from, Patrick Johnson again.