

The Joy of Being Church 2: *Joy in the Worst of Circumstances*

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 16:1-6,

¹Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. ²I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” ³As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. ⁴Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. ⁵The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

Philippians 1:15-27

¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. ²⁷Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

This section of Paul's letter gives us a glimpse into the circumstances in which it was written. Paul is joyful, but he is not on the beach, no cool drink in hand, probably no view of a sunrise or sunset. He's not at a writer's retreat overlooking some gorgeous mountain vista either. Paul writes to the Philippians from prison. His imprisonment has allowed some other preachers to rise and command attention. Some are authentic, others with questionable motives or preaching for personal gain, but Paul says, in effect, "As long as people hear the gospel of Christ, I'm okay, better than okay. I will rejoice. Not knowing if he will be released from prison, or be escorted out to his execution, Paul writes, *Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. No matter what happens, I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice... I will continue with joy in faith.*

We are not sure where Paul is, exactly. Some say Caesarea, others Ephesus, maybe Rome. All we know is that he is suffering persecution because he has been preaching the gospel, and to bestow upon Jesus Christ honor and power and authority over human life did not go well with the powers of his world. Locked up for simply proclaiming his faith, nonetheless, the primary note of Paul's letter is one of joy! Now, prisons in the Roman empire were not like our prisons. They were used for holding people awaiting trial, and afterward they would be acquitted, punished or executed. They were often in the basement of a royal palace or government building, a short upstairs climb to where the prisoner's fate would be decided. The government provided nothing – no food, water, or blankets. The only compassion offered was if family or friend showed up with provisions, you might not starve or freeze to death.¹

Obviously, someone had provided Paul with a quill, ink and papyrus paper. Essential provisions for Paul. But remember, even before being imprisoned, Paul was no stranger to suffering. We know from the Acts of the Apostles, he had been stoned, beaten and left for dead,

¹ Am grateful to Tom Are's sermon, "The Only Way to Make It in this World", Village Presbyterian, 11/7/04, and to Patrick Johnson of First Presbyterian, Asheville, "Seeds of Joy," 10/16/23, for some these observations about Paul's imprisonment along with mine.

shipwrecked and bitten by a poisonous snake. However, he used that suffering wherever he preached and nurtured little household churches to further the cause of Christ. It was worth it, in his mind, if through his suffering, others heard the bold claim of Jesus Christ upon their hearts.

Evidently, Paul's friends in the Philippian church had gotten wind of his whereabouts. They sent Epaphroditus to offer aid, and they wanted word back: "Paul, how are you doing? Are you well? Are you being treated fairly?" Their concern is very personal; but it is also profoundly theological. *How can it be - that an apostle of Jesus Christ ends up in jail? How does God let this happen?* That little Philippian congregation, in a major trade route city under the boot of Rome, had to wonder if this is what happens to the Lord's apostle, what will happen to the church? What will happen to us?

Paul's imprisonment reminded them, and reminds us, that following Jesus Christ is not a pathway to a comfortable life; it is a way of life that participates in the suffering of the world God so loves. We show forth our faith by doing what Jesus did: by showing God's love, mercy, peace and justice against worldly odds, and by what Paul did – claiming the power of Christ's resurrection to redeem and save come what may. Paul sends them this sermon in the form of a letter, saying, *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* Which is a way of saying, "Do not worry about me – join me with the spread of the gospel. We follow a crucified Lord and Savior, so let's use our suffering as a sign of God's presence in and for the world."

In the absolute worst of circumstances, Christian people find deep joy in living and serving others for the sake of the gospel. Now, unlike us, Paul did not live in a trauma informed world of psycho-therapy and care that we – in our time – have become acquainted with. I don't want folks to leave here thinking they heard a sermon about ignoring your own suffering, or an admonition to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get on with it. Thank God, we know better than that, and in almost every sphere of life we take seriously how suffering and trauma can be

dehumanizing, can warp a person's worldview and behavior, and if not addressed physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually, can grow to exacerbate the suffering in one's own life and in the lives of others.

We also know we are living in a time of unprecedented global trauma, suffering and sadness. From the unrelenting war in Ukraine, to the fires in Hawaii, to the famine in Yemen and Sudan, to the devastating earthquake in Morocco, to the flooding in Libya just this past week, we've seen whole populations reeling in the wake of massive death, destruction, and devastation. Further, on the individual scale of human flourishing, recent studies show a "Rising Tide of Global Sadness." A team of scientists and psychologists from New Zealand studied twenty-three million headlines published between 2000 and 2019 by forty-seven popular news outlets in the United States. Over the last two decades their analysis shows that the "news" has grown significantly more negative. The proportion of headlines that denote anger, fear, disgust and sadness has grown exponentially. They conclude that negativity in the news does reflect negativity in real life.

Another study shows that in the last thirty years, the number of people who locate themselves in the lowest category on a "happiness" scale has grown by fifty percent. Beyond our nation's borders, Gallup surveyed 150 thousand people from 140 countries about their emotional lives and found that experiences of negative emotions – related to stress, sadness, anger, worry, and physical pain hit a record high last year.² We see what is happening everywhere. Misery influences politics and civil unrest; suffering can create hyper-individualism and escalating division. Is there anything that can turn our mourning into joy? Sitting in a prison cell amid the worst of circumstances, according to Paul, Christ can redeem our suffering. Christ can redeem our suffering.

² David Brooks, "The Rising Tide of Global Sadness," *New York Times*, 10/27/22.

In my last church before coming here, Shandon Presbyterian in Columbia, South Carolina, there is an Adult Sunday morning class called the Sara Touchstone Class. Sarah Touchstone was a trained Christian Educator and a Presbyterian Elder. Her two sons became Presbyterian ministers, her daughter a Christian Educator, and her husband, Bruce, served another church as their Finance Director in his retirement. Back in the mid-1980's during an illness, Sara had received some blood in the hospital. Safety protocols that are now routine were not in place back in the 1980's, and she contracted HIV. It quickly became AIDS, and in those days – which many of us remember well – what made it worse was the stigma and fear that surrounded it. Ill-informed and theologically irrational religious people called it God's scourge and punishment on the gay community. It infuriated this gentle woman, wife, mother and Christian educator that the gospel was being perverted to further hostility and prohibit compassion toward an already marginalized community of suffering people.

Sara asked if she could address the congregation at Shandon Presbyterian Church and talk about her own experience. On a Sunday morning, she walked to the front of the Sanctuary, stood before her church family and said, "I want to tell you something. I have AIDS and it will kill me. I do not have long now. I know you are praying for me and I am grateful. You may not know this, but in the early church those who were sick and dying, would often stand before the congregation, not only to receive prayers, but also to give testimony. That is why I am here. I hate what has happened to me; but I want you to know that I trust Jesus Christ. He too suffered and has promised that suffering will not have the last word. My faith is not shaken, and I am not afraid. When suffering comes to you, remember that I was here, and remember that Jesus is stronger than suffering, and do not be afraid."

Shandon Presbyterian Church became the first and primary congregation in Columbia to develop an extensive ministry among those suffering from AIDS, by making and delivering meals, visiting in hospice care, offering the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. By the work of the

AIDS Care Team, the faithfulness of that congregation grew out of the testimony of Sara Touchstone who shared her faith from the worst of circumstances.

That is what Paul's testimony is for us. A catalyst for trusting God in Jesus Christ. So that when we find ourselves in the worst of circumstances, we will live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, and against all odds we can find joy, and we will rejoice.

AMEN.