

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT
Mark Gravrock
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Pentecost 18
Philippians 4.1-9

Grace and peace . . .

My dad was also a pastor.

I grew up as a P.K.

Back in the days of my childhood,

we used to have more regular pastoral conferences,

gatherings of pastors and their families for fellowship and inspiration.

When I was a child, I loved pastoral conferences!

Really!

There were lots of reasons, but the biggest reason, I think,

is that pastors seemed like the most fun people in the world:

There was more humor and more play

in a group of pastors and their families

than I saw anywhere else.

Well, time has passed,

and never since my childhood

have I ever heard anybody say

that pastors seem like the most fun people in the world.

And . . . I've watched a lot of pastors since those days,

and not all pastors are fun:

Some of them are just sticks-in-the-mud,

and some are angry and bitter people.

And . . . since those days I've met a lot of wonderful laypeople,

and I've seen the same joy and humor and play

in people from all walks of life.

In fact, I invite you to think about them right now:

You know who they are.

Think about those members of our congregation

whose lives simply breathe God's grace:

They may have known deep tragedy in their lives.

They may be dealing with serious illness,

or struggle daily with pain.
 But as you watch them,
 they live their lives and bear their struggles
 with balance, with peace, with deep inner joy,
 and with an eye always for someone else's need.

So maybe not all pastors are the most fun people in the world,
 and pastors don't by any means have a corner on the market,
 but here's what I think:

Here's what I'm convinced of:

**Wherever grace breaks through –
 wherever the grace of Jesus breaks through –
 there is room for humor and play.**

In one of our readings for this morning,
 the Apostle Paul writes:

**Rejoice in the Lord always;
 again I will say, Rejoice.¹**

It's a famous verse.

Maybe you learned it in Sunday School or VBS.

Maybe you learned the chorus in camp:

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say Rejoice.

It's an odd verse, isn't it?

How can Paul tell us to rejoice?

You can't command an emotion, can you?

How can you command another person to feel a particular feeling?

Or is joy not an emotion?

On any given Sunday,

several of us in this room will be going through awful circumstances,
 or facing overwhelming worries.

I'm aware of what some of you are facing.

I'm aware of some

of the struggles and tragedies and griefs that haunt you.

¹ *Philippians 4.4*

And I know that there's far more
that I'm not aware of.

In the face of the stuff we actually deal with,
how dare Paul say,

Rejoice in the Lord always?

*If you really knew, Paul, where I am today,
you'd never say something so thoughtless and insensitive!*

Expand your view to look at what's going on in our world:

In a world where ISIS is about to overrun Kobani,
and we wonder whether our air strikes are accomplishing anything,
in a world where Ebola has killed thousands in west Africa,
and we've now seen our first death in the U.S.,
in a world overrun both by fear and by fear-mongering,

Rejoice in the Lord always?

What kind of a Pollyana message is that?

What kind of blinders are you wearing, Paul?

Are you just sitting there at your quiet desk,
in your safe, booklined study,
sipping a cup of good coffee,
and writing nice pious uplifting words
to your comfortable congregation?

Well, no, actually.

Paul's words take on a totally different cast
when you discover where Paul is
and where his people are.

Paul writes from jail.

He is in prison for his faith.

He spends quite a bit of the first chapter of this letter,
wrestling with his future:

He is very much aware that any day
he may be taken and executed for his faith.

*For me, to live is Christ, he writes,
and to die is gain.*

That's where Paul is.

And his people? The folks he's writing to?

The congregation in Philippi is poor,
struggling to make ends meet.
And they too are facing persecution for their faith.

Paul says,

You have been granted the privilege of suffering for Christ.

That's the context for

Rejoice in the Lord always.

And that context makes me want to give Paul another listen.

I invite you, then, to listen to Paul's words,
with that context in mind:

Paul is in jail, and may be killed any day.

His people are struggling with poverty and persecution.

In the light of all that,

here is what Paul wants to urge his friends:

My sisters and brothers,

I love you and long for you.

You are my joy and my crown.

Here is my request for you:

First, stand firm in the Lord.² –

You know whose you are in Christ. Stand in him!

He is your solid foundation, no matter what happens!

Second, stay on the same page with each other:

Pull together in the gospel, and help each other.³

Third, rejoice in Christ always –

yes, even in the face of poverty and attack.

Next, when your persecutors show up at your door,

meet them with gentleness,

not anger or violence.

Don't be afraid: Your Lord is always near!⁴

I know you're worried: Who wouldn't be?

There are real threats facing you!

Instead of getting dragged down with anxiety and worry,

² V. 1

³ Vv. 2-3

⁴ V. 5

talk with your Lord:

Let God know what you need.

Make your requests in a spirit of gratitude and trust,
and then leave it in God's hands.⁵

Here's the result: Peace:

God's marvelous peace –

peace that goes beyond anything that makes sense to us –

God's peace will form a fortress around your hearts and minds.⁶

God will hold you!

That changes the picture.

This is no facile, ivory-tower letter.

This is not Bobby McFaren singing "Don't worry, be happy."

This is nothing shallow.

The shallow version would be,

Be happy all the time.

Be nice to people. Be Minnesota Nice.

Whatever happens, don't sweat it:

Everything will be okay.

That's not what this is.

This is survival stuff –

hard-nosed advice from the trenches.

Even so, how can Paul command an emotion?

How can he tell us, *Rejoice always – no matter what?*

Rejoice in the Lord always.

I found myself wondering the other day,

What would be the opposite of rejoicing?

I'd like to suggest that

the opposite of joy is not sorrow.

The opposite is not depression.

I'd like to suggest that

⁵ V. 6

⁶ V. 7

the opposite of joy is *distraction* -- *distraction and preoccupation*.

Let me give you an example, a parallel:

Have you noticed how amazingly, stunningly beautiful this valley is?

There are days when I can drive the ten miles in from Creston,
and not notice the beauty even for a moment.

That ever happen to you?

How can that be?

My mind is chewing on something,
or my heart is aching over something.

I'm utterly distracted.

My mind and heart are wrapped up in a tiny ball,
while stunning beauty is crying to me all along the way!

And then, all of sudden, the sky breaks through –

or the mountains, or the fields –

beauty breaks through,

and my soul says, "Oh, Lord!"

and whatever I was chewing on loses some of its hold on me.

Sometimes it takes even more:

Sometimes the sights are not enough to interrupt my tiny world.

Sometimes I need the wind –

the tangible, dynamic wind on my skin

waking me up and reminding me: "I am here!"

Sometimes nature can be something of a sacrament of God's presence.

The opposite of joy is *distraction*, *distraction and preoccupation*.

Here is the truth, the truth we are usually too preoccupied to notice:

The Lord is near.

Here is the truth:

Our God has not abandoned us.

Our God has remembered us,

has come and become one of us.

This world is a world of suffering and pain,

a world of violence and death,

a world of ISIS and Ebola,

a world of economic uncertainty,

a world of radiation and chemotherapy,

a world of conflict and strife.

Our God has entered fully into our world,
entered fully into our valley of the shadow of death,
shouldered all of it with us,
carried it to the cross with us and for us,
carried it to his tomb and left it there,
and brings us out through to the other side.

Our faith doesn't offer us an easy escape
from this world and its struggles.

Our faith doesn't give us some kind of magical protection.

What we are given is Jesus Christ –

we are woven into him,
into a reality that is deeper and more solid
than anything we will ever face,
into a love and a commitment that outlasts
every fear, every worry, every tragedy,
even as it takes seriously every fear and worry and tragedy,
and takes every fear and worry and tragedy
right into the center of God's own heart.

What all this means is that Paul's central word is not

Rejoice in the Lord always.

Paul's central word is

The Lord is near.

Paul's central word is

Stand fast in the Lord. Stay in Jesus.

Because the Lord is near, and the Lord is yours,
you have a place to stand.

Because the Lord is near, and the Lord is yours,
you will be able to be gentle with those who despise you.

Because the Lord is near, and the Lord is yours,
you have a place to bring your worries and anxieties.

Because the Lord is near, and the Lord is yours,
you have the gift of surprising peace enwrapping your heart and mind,
surrounding you like a fortress.

And the end result of all that is joy –

joy which is not necessarily an emotion,
joy which is deeper than any happiness,

joy which is the sure, confident knowledge
of who you are and whose you are.

Our sense of peace is never complete –
not in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death!
Our joy is never an unmixed, unbridled gladness –
not as long as we are broken.

But Christ's joy and peace are there for us always:

The Lord is near.

It's like looking up and suddenly seeing the mountains again,
or the wild Montana sky,
and saying, "Oh, Lord!"
and remembering the truth.

It's like looking and seeing your beloved's face
and knowing, all over again, that you are loved.

It's like walking to the tomb
and discovering once again
that the stone is rolled away.

The Lord is near. Rejoice.

Amen.