

“REJOICE!”

Philippians 4:1-9

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

This is the theme and sum of Paul’s letter to Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Here in the heart of the letter, Paul redoubles the celebratory word, *rejoice*. Why? Because the Philippians need extra encouragement. We know there was opposition to the Philippian church from other accounts. Christians in Philippi were being met with indifference and hostility. In fact, Philippi is where Paul and Silas were dragged and beaten and thrown in jail, into the innermost cell, their feet fastened with stocks. Evidently there were also dissensions and disagreements within the fellowship. Earlier in the letter Paul tells them, “Some preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.” Some from “selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering.” Later he tells them, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing.” Even skimming this letter, you can sense Paul’s awareness of hostility and dissension within and without. So, then why does he commend so much rejoicing?

“I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord,” he says. Paul doesn’t say what they were arguing about, but you and I know at some point this new church was going to have to choose a carpet color. Euodia said, “What do you think of ‘rosy red’ for the atrium?” And Syntyche said, “Honey, everyone knows an atrium ought to be mauve.”

Then again, their argument could have been about something quite serious. “Syntyche, I know it’s a hard time and there’s a lot of bad news, but you can’t keep on living in the doldrums. You’re getting hard to work with, and new members are going to get second thoughts about joining a place led by grumps.” “Oh, Euodia, you’re always papering over things and looking on the bright side. If a tsunami were about to consume us, you’d say, ‘Look how sparkly the water is!’ There are wildfires in California, devastations in Texas and Florida, suffering in Puerto Rico, lying politicians, an opioid epidemic in our own neighborhood, a healthcare crisis, and the list goes on. And there’s a hurricane about to hit Ireland. Ireland! The luck of the Irish! How can you rejoice in times like these?” “Syntyche, I want you to remember a couple of things. One, your name means ‘good luck,’ and you could do better to live up to it. And, two, Paul wrote this letter to us from prison. He is writing in chains, but calling on us to rejoice. This Christian way isn’t about optimism, but showing the world the Lord is always near to us.”

Paul is concerned for the church to be a place that exudes joy because, well...who needs a church that doesn’t? But now let’s conduct a thought experiment. I’m going to list some of the words from Paul’s letter, and then I’m going to ask a question. Here’s the word list: *joy, rejoice, gentleness, thanksgiving, peace, true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellence, praise*. And here’s the thought experiment. Let’s take this list of words and put them in a word cloud on a poster board. And let’s walk around town and poll the general public with the question, “What do all these words remind you of?” how many folks do you think would answer, “church”? And, of those, how many folks do you think would answer, “Baptist”?

Certainly, it depends on the kind of experiences we've had with church. Countless people have turned away from the church because what they found was most emphatically not a place of rejoicing. Baptist churches have a reputation, rather well-deserved, for emphasizing doctrinal purity over gentleness. Many of us bear scars from old fights and persistent divisions.

But in this course of sermons, as we reimagine our Baptist identity, I wonder if Paul's letter to Philippi is not precisely the kind of encouragement we need today. Yes, there have been divisions, and yes, the church is not the first thing that necessarily comes to mind when we think of gentleness and peace and excellence and whatever is pure. But this is precisely why Paul encourages the church to redouble our efforts at unity, so that we might be known more for *who* and what we're for rather than who and what we're against. I can't speak on behalf of all Baptists, but I believe God has given us a remarkable gift, which is the work of disrupting the prevailing narrative about who Baptists are.

One of the ways we learn to do this is by watching the way children run. Children, by their very nature, lean forward when they run. They don't run with hesitation, landing on their heels. They run leaning into the direction they want to go, with innocent abandon, so that their weight carries them, and gravity itself propels them forward. It's a lighter burden on the heart and on the knees. We may learn to run the race set before us with joy, with children in the lead.

But children, as you lead us, you must lead us with your gentleness, so that our whole church's gentleness becomes known beyond these walls. You must let your gentleness shine in a distinct way. I'm reminded of looking for shark teeth on the beach. As a child, I learned a little trick for finding them amongst all the myriad other shells. If you practice long enough, you begin to recognize that shark teeth have a special sheen or gloss on them, which helps you spot them more easily among the other black and gray shells. Just so, may your joy shine in the world, so that your gentleness becomes the light of God. May your bright faces carry a distinct shine that helps a watching world find God.

I remember those faces shone on me as a child. When I was a child, every Sunday I went to church, and there to greet me were Mary White and Nell Briley, both of whom I would have guessed at that time to be about 970 years old. But their eyes would light up when I came down the hallway. They'd be sitting at their desk keeping roll, and I'd give them my little offering envelope with the four quarters in it. And I couldn't get past them without hugs and lipstick stains on my cheeks and, "How was your week?" and, "I'm so glad you're here," and, "We love you." This is how I was welcomed to church every Sunday of my childhood. It makes a difference, to be delighted in, to have people's faces shine on you.

Children I want you to know that we delight in you. My predecessor and our church's beloved former pastor, Guy Sayles, has a lovely way of saying it: that each one of you is a child of God, and God takes great delight in you. Yes, we hope you will grow and mature here in our company, and come to know all the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ. And we hope just as much that you discover here that God has already found you, that the Lord is always near, to guard your hearts and your minds with Christ's peace. We also hope that just as God delights in you, that you will learn to delight in God. We hope that by your rejoicing, your excitement,

curiosity, eagerness, and “leaning in” to the gospel, that you will lead us all to do delight in God as well, so that we may all shine the light of God’s gentleness in a hurting world.

As you bless us, I bless you on behalf of this beloved congregation. With delight, I bless you to say, May the grace of God the Father, the peace of Christ the son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. May the Lord bless you and keep you, and make his face to shine upon you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace...that you may rejoice, always. And again, I say, *rejoice!*

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