

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button

Occasion: 16 Pentecost

Date: September 28, 2014

Theme: “Joyful, Joyful”

Text: Philippians 1: 21-30

^{NRS} Philippians 1

²¹*For 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.*

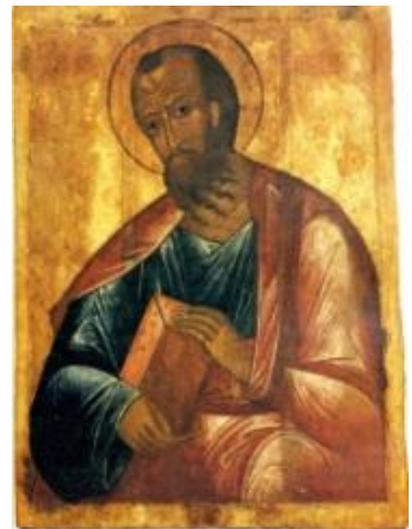
²⁷*Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Beloved in the Lord, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Son our Lord Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In the past year that I've been preaching from the Apostle Paul I'm afraid I might have given you a wrong impression.

In the sermons I've delivered based on Galatians, First Corinthians, and Romans, Paul was typically embroiled in conflict. Whether he was fighting over the very meaning of the gospel or struggling to define the nature of authentic discipleship, we most frequently saw Paul hip-deep in controversy, often excoriating his opponents and generally taking no prisoners. And here is my concern: that sampling of Paul might give you the impression that all Paul did was fight, which would be wrong. I think it's mostly true that Paul loved a good fight, but it's not true that he loved to fight or that he thrived on conflict. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is abundant proof that Paul was as much a lover as a scrapper, and for that reason I'm taking these next four Sundays to explore with you another side of Paul as revealed in his letter to the saints in the city of Philippi.





(That, by the way, is Philippi, a Roman colony located in Macedonia, a hop-skip from the Aegean Sea, not to be confused with the Philippines, an island nation in the western Pacific Ocean. Just to be clear!)



Philippians is often referred to as Paul's letter of joy, and for good reason.

Paul opens his letter with prayer for the Philippians, declaring, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you" (1:3). In the ensuing four chapters Paul will use the words joy and rejoice over a dozen times, famously climaxing in chapter 4 when Paul exhorts, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (4:4). I encourage you to read Philippians through, preferably in one sitting. It's relatively short (maybe a 15-minute read) and from beginning to end you'll catch the ebullient spirit that pervades. Not that Paul doesn't occasionally toss a rhetorical brickbat at his opponents, but overall, the tone is warm and intimate and joyful.



The question is, Why?

Why is Paul so in-right, out-right, up-right, down-right hap-hap-happy all the time? If I were in his shoes, I'm not so sure I would have the joy-joy-joy-joy down in my heart, because Paul is in a mess. Paul is writing to the Philippians (probably from Rome) as a prisoner of the Roman Empire. He's in the hoosegow, the stoney lonesome, a guest of the Greybar Hotel, the clink, the pokey, the joint.



The New Revised Standard Version translates Paul as saying that he's imprisoned, but the actual words Paul uses are "in chains." Paul is in chains, and yet here he is telling the Philippians rejoice, rejoice, rejoice. How can he say that? How can he be facing capital punishment and at the same time expressing his own joy and contentment? But before we get to those questions, let me take a moment to explain how Paul got into those chains in the first place.

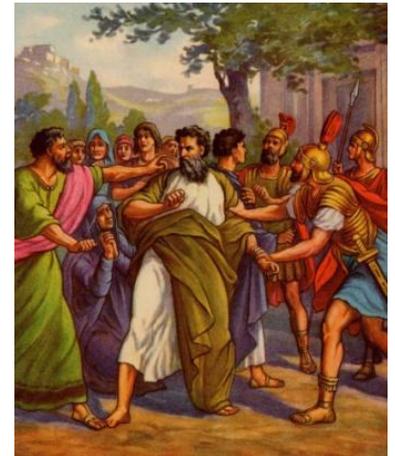
Throughout his correspondence Paul makes repeated references to the collection he is gathering for the saints in Jerusalem.



(I think it's funny that even in the first generation of Christian existence Paul was fund-raising. Some things never change!) According to Acts, at the first great ecumenical council in Jerusalem Paul was commissioned to evangelize the gentiles, on the condition that he would receive an offering from them for the church in Jerusalem. That church, under the leadership of James, the brother of our Lord, was in dire straits. They were being persecuted, they had *beaucoup*s orphans and

widows, and they were broke. Paul was anxious to help, and what's more, he embraced this offering as a way of showing to the world that in Christ the ancient wall dividing Gentile and Jew had once and for all come a-tumblin' down.

Following the Acts of the Apostles, in approximately 57 a.d. [or more appropriately, c.e., for "common era"] Paul journeyed to Jerusalem with the offering he had collected. But when Paul, the former persecutor of the church turned apostle, set foot one in the Jerusalem Temple, immediately a riot broke out with a mob seizing Paul intending to kill him. Before they could lynch him, however, the Roman authorities took him into custody. Under what charge, you ask? Not that the Romans needed a charge, but they probably arrested him for treason. Paul was preaching that Jesus is Lord, in Greek, *kyrios*, a title reserved exclusively for the Roman Emperor. In other words, Paul was preaching that Jesus was in charge, not Caesar. Given such a threat to the imperium, the Romans held Paul in Jerusalem until they learned of a plot to assassinate him, whereupon he was transferred to the port city of Caesarea, where they held him another two years. Paul eventually appeals to have his case heard by the emperor himself, and was then taken by ship to Rome. So by the time Paul writes to his Christian friends in Philippi, he has been in chains at least two, maybe three, possibly four years, and yet he has this cheery tone and joyful attitude, telling his sisters and brothers in Christ, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice." Assuming that Paul had not lost his marbles and was still mostly in touch with reality, how does this happen? Why isn't he writing Philippi in tears and agony? I certainly would.



Paul puts a good face on his situation.

Although Paul must have known that he didn't stand a snowball's chance of surviving the Emperor's justice, still he holds out the possibility to the Philippians that he might yet get back to see them. He also rejoices in and takes comfort from the opportunities he's seized to evangelize his jailers, even to the point of extending greetings to the Philippians from the saints in the emperor's household (4:22). [That's a nice touch!] But none of those things gets at the real heart of Paul's joy. What makes his spirit soar and his soul sing out is that Paul knows that he is sharing in the suffering of Christ. Not in spite of his chains, but precisely because of his chains, Paul knows that his suffering is wrapped up in the suffering of

Christ, and just as Christ was raised from death's dark tomb, so Paul also trusts that he will be raised from his own humiliation to sit at the table of the Lord, which puts us exactly at the intersection of suffering and joy.



Who would have even thought that there's any connection at all between the two? Think of joy and we see bands marching, balloons launching, hearts and hands and voices lifted in victory. Think of suffering and we see deprivation, hardship, and misery. How can the two stand in the same room together, much less cohere and complement one another?

For Paul suffering is a given, coming to all, rich and poor, weak and strong. So the question is not whether you will suffer, but for what will you suffer, and for Paul the only answer to that question is Christ, his kingdom, his cause, his love, his justice. If we invest our lives in anything less than Christ, life can only end tragically. But living in, with, and for Christ, the suffering we put into our families, friendships, and vocations becomes meaningful, and with meaning comes joy, and who is Jesus but the joy of all human desiring. In Jesus our suffering is redeemed and transformed from dirges of death to hymns of glory.



Sandie Guthans is about to be commissioned as a rostered leader in the Evangelical Church in America, an Associate in Ministry, which means that she's opening herself to a world of hurt.



You can expect to suffer in any calling that's undertaken with any seriousness, but in the case of rostered leadership in the church, suffering is actually part of the job description. In any work of the heart, whether in the home or in the marketplace, you inevitably have to suffer angry people, hurtful people, people who may sometimes say or do cruel things to you, but only in ministry do

you meet those people at the altar of the Lord and have to say to them, "The Body of Christ, given for you; the Blood of Christ shed for you." And not only say it, but mean it.

I remember a woman in a church I served a long time back, over twenty years ago. Somehow I offended her [I might have been wearing a beard at the time!], but regardless, I guess I hurt her feelings with something I said, but she wouldn't tell me how or what or when.



She just stopped talking to me, although she talked to plenty of other people about what a bad pastor I was, how I was hurting the church, I heard that she even called me toxic. [I felt like an EPA site.] But she never told me. I called, I sent her notes, knocked on her door. One time I even sent her flowers, pleading for forgiveness, and nothing. If I approached her at church, she would walk to the other side of the room. But every Sunday she came to the table and every Sunday, presenting bread and cup to her, I would say, “The Body of Christ, given for you; the Blood of Christ shed for you.”



When she couldn't get enough people together to throw me out, she went to another church. I saw her years later, and she still wouldn't talk to me. Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi, that was painful.

Over the years, of course, I've had thousands of people thank me, bless me, support and encourage me, and who do I still remember and rehearse in my mind?

I recall an episode on the old M*A*S*H series when Father Mulcahy tells Hawkeye, “When you fail, a person loses their life. When I fail, a person loses their soul.” I don't know if that's exactly theologically true, but that's how it feels.



Paul knew that feeling, I know that feeling, and you, Sandie, will also know it. Though you have considerable experience in ministry and have excelled in your studies, you have never been a rostered leader, and that will put a whole different



frame to your service, with different expectations, responsibilities, levels of accountability, and very different vulnerabilities.

That is to say, once you take on this title you become a much bigger target, and suddenly people who mean you only well will take it upon themselves to comment on everything about you, no matter how trivial, your appearance, your personality, your shortcomings, whatever, just to help you improve. And there may come a day when you barely make it home, devastated from all the concern for your improvement, and pouring your heart out to Raymond you'll wonder why you ever took this on. And you, Raymond, may become angry for the heartbreak your spouse is made to bear, cursing that blankety-blank church, railing at that blankety-blank pastor, and asking out loud, “Who do those blankety-blank-blank-blanks think they are?” And the answer, of course, is sinners, frail, fragile egos who would never think of judging themselves with the fury they direct toward you.

So why haven't I long ago yanked this dog collar off my neck? Why are there women and men across the church catholic still willing to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous parishioners? Why will you rise to accept this office knowing full well that with it will come grief and suffering? Joy.



Sheer joy. For just as Paul found his joy in the chains that bound him to his death, so you will find joy in the faith and assurance that you walk in the steps of the matriarchs and patriarchs, the prophets and apostles, and in that faith you will declare with Paul, as he does in Philippians, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14).