

## Joy in All Circumstances

Preached by Rev. Cindy Frost on March 29, 2015 at FPC Fort Collins.

One of the key verses for our Lenten theme on joy comes from Hebrews 12, “looking to Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” Today, Palm Sunday, ushers in this Holy Week celebrating Christ’s passion which started with the triumphal entry and Hosanna’s of the crowd and then continued through Good Friday when the crowds’ cheers of Hosanna’s changed to cruel calls for him to be crucified. Christ could endure the ups and downs of the circumstances of that week for the joy that was set before him. A joy that was not tied to his circumstances. Today as we continue in Paul’s letter to the Philippians we will look at what goes into that kind of joy that can remain constant no matter what the circumstance. Let’s read God’s word from Philippians 4:10-14.

How many of you have job interviews that you’ll never forget? I tend to remember when I was interviewed for a job but forget those when I interviewed someone else. Except in this one case. I was working at a university counseling center and was part of a team interviewing candidates for the center’s Associate Director. One of my fellow counselors had a favorite question that she liked to ask—and I’m still trying to decide whether it was brilliant or just plain cruel. After we’d talked to the candidate, Mike, for a while she mentioned that the Associate Director would be called on to make presentations on campus, sometimes without much advance notice. So, she gave Mike a flip chart, some markers, and about 20 minutes of prep time and asked him to give us a presentation on anything. And Mike did an excellent job giving a presentation that I still remember to this day. He talked about the movie “The Shawshank Redemption,” and about Andy, one of the main characters who was falsely convicted of having killed his wife and was therefore serving a life sentence in prison. But Andy refused to let his horrific prison existence break his spirit. He famously said at a key turning point in the plot: “I guess it all comes down to a simple choice, really. Get busy living or get busy dying.” Mike explained in his impromptu presentation how we are all in some kind of prison—prisons of fear, self-concern, addictions, etc.—places where we are stuck and don’t know how to get free. And yet we all have this choice to make of whether we’re going to get busy living or get busy dying. We can choose dying and yield to our helplessness and choose to stay trapped or we can choose life and help and hope. It was quite an impressive presentation for 20 minutes of prep time and Mike was eventually hired for the job.

I’ve thought about Mike’s presentation a lot this past week as I became absorbed in a book that was part of the “Everybody reads” program at the Poudre River Library. The book was called *Shakespeare Saved My Life* by Laura Bates and it’s the author’s recounting of her many years teaching and discussing Shakespeare with inmates in the isolation units of some of Indiana’s prisons. In spite of Shakespeare’s challenging language, the prisoners could really connect with his themes such as murder contemplated and carried out in *Macbeth*, revenge in *Hamlet*, and gang loyalty in *Romeo and Juliet*. Discussing these plays caused the prisoners to reflect, often for the

first time, on their motivations for their wrongdoing such as their sense of honor that motivated their revenge. Larry Newton was the prisoner most profoundly changed by his encounter with Shakespeare and he was the one who claimed that “Shakespeare saved his life.” In his discussions with Professor Bates, Larry would make the same point that Mike did—that everyone is in prisons of their own making. By analyzing how the themes of Shakespeare connected with his own life, he found ways to break out of some of his own prisons even while he remained locked up for life.

These reflections on prison really struck me in relation to our sermon series on Philippians, the most joyful of Paul’s letters which he wrote while he was in prison in Ephesus. Especially as we read what he says in these verses from today’s passage: “for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I 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 to being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” Paul consistently shows an unusual lack of self-concern throughout Philippians. As early as the first chapter he seems to be debating whether he’d prefer life or death concluding that “For to me living is Christ, and dying is gain.” (Phil 1:21ff) He really can go either way, not out of some morbid death wish but in recognizing that God has him either way.

Here Paul writes, “For I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” It’s one thing for those of us who have experienced a middle-class, relatively sheltered life to say something like that. It’s another for Paul who went from a position of prestige to being a prisoner in chains. Part of his schooling in being content in all circumstances was his experiencing all kinds of circumstances. He writes, “I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty.” In 2 Corinthians 6 he writes about what he and his co-workers have experienced: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights and hunger. By contrast, I have things quite good, really I can only relate to Paul’s sleepless nights(!)—and yet I know that I still struggle with contentment.

Paul may be a prisoner in chains in an actual jail cell, but he doesn’t seem to be in the other prisons that we create for ourselves. Prisons that keeps us from living the joyful life that God intends for us. Prisons of self-concern or self-protection. Prisons of bitterness, resentment, or unforgiveness. Prisons of all kinds of fears—fears of rejection, or loss, or failure or even death. Prisons of all kinds of addictions ranging from those involving chemical dependency, to shopping addictions where we always need more clothes or the latest high-tech gadgets, or to what John Ortberg calls “approval addiction”—needing people to like us or be impressed with us. Prisons that come from being dependent on material comforts or our physical well-being. Prisons created by the illusion of being in control of our lives and thinking we can take credit for all our successes. In the words of Larry Newton, “Everyone just puts themselves into so many prisons.” (ch. 17, p 80) But Paul seems to be free from any of these prisons.

Paul shares with us his secret. This freedom from the prisons that we build for ourselves, the freedom to choose to get busy living in the midst of any and all circumstances seems to come from Paul's statement, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Paul is talking about being "in Christ" which our Paul talked about last week. Jesus Christ said, "I have come so that you might have life and have it more abundantly." (Jn 10:10) Being in Christ means drawing strength from being connected to the life-giving vine of Christ. Drawing our life from Christ empowers us to make the choice to get busy living no matter what prison we find ourselves in and through Christ we can find freedom.

Because I've limited my "screen time" through Lent, I've had a chance to do more reading. In addition to the Shakespeare saved my life book I've been reading the book *Tattoos on the Heart* written by Gregory Boyle a Jesuit priest in downtown LA who works with gang members in and out of prison. He helped found Homeboy Industries a gang intervention program which helps gang members learn job skills and find employment. One of their mottoes on the t-shirts that these gang members make and sell is "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." The book is full of both inspiring and heart-wrenching stories of his interactions with these troubled adolescents and young adults. It's been interesting to be reading this book juxtaposed with the Shakespeare book. Both the professor and the priest were incarnating Christ in being present and faithful and accepting of these hardened individuals and both had transformative effects. But I couldn't help but be aware of the difference in what they had to offer. Shakespeare provided great opportunities for self-reflection and more expansive perspectives but those individuals still were only left with what they could muster on their own strength. The Jesuit priest and his staff had so much more to offer, sometimes with words, but mostly with the grace and forgiveness of Christ lived out in their relationships with these gang members, allowing them to experience unconditional love and acceptance that caused them to be profoundly transformed. "G.", what they called Gregory the priest, not only accepted them but showed delight in them, something that no one had ever done, and thus pointed them to a God who also delights in them, even while they are still wounded and broken.

Grace, being delighted in, unconditional love, forgiveness, strength to carry on—these are all gifts that are available to us "in Christ." As we focus on joy and the call to rejoice that appears throughout the letter to the Philippians it is interesting to note that the root of the word for joy is the same as the root for grace. (char) One commentator writes, "There is a very close connection between these two concepts. Those who have come to experience God's grace, as Paul has done, know that, by standing firm in their faith they can continue to celebrate the Christian life as a festival of joy, in perfect freedom from all worries and fears." W.G. Morrice, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 512) Freedom from our worries and fears or from whatever prison that holds us captive is found through experiencing and internalizing God's grace and unconditional love and recognizing that God's delight in us. By living "in Christ", connected to the life-giving vine, we experience Christ's power to help us make our escapes from the prisons that we find ourselves in.

Reading those two books side by side pointed me to a sharp contrast. The Shakespeare professor could help the prisoners find inner resources to draw on that they hadn't before which made a huge difference to them. But even Larry Newton who claimed Shakespeare saved his life later acknowledged that it was his friendship with the professor that motivated him "more than Shakespeare ever did." (Ch, 74, p263) That ministry of incarnation—making flesh the love and acceptance of God—whether or not it is motivated by a love of Christ still has a powerful impact. How much more so the ministry of Homeboy Industries which could connect these troubled individuals up to all the resources of the Creator of the Universe and the Lover of their Souls. To introduce them to the one who can strengthen them and empower them to make different choices and live a different life.

The contrast that reading these books pointed me to was that of self-sufficiency versus Christ-sufficiency. In this passage, Paul is making this same contrast. This word that Paul uses for contentment is actually the word for self-sufficiency that the Stoics used to indicate a spiritual freedom or detachment from one's circumstances. Paul seems to be saying the same thing as the Stoics but then is quick to point out the difference. That anything he does, any spiritual freedom he experiences is not coming from himself but comes through the empowerment of Jesus Christ, who strengthens him. That is the secret that allows him to be content and even experience joy in hunger or in being well-fed, having plenty or being in need. Living a life empowered by Christ is why he is free from the prisons that can so easily hold us captive.

Earlier I mentioned how Paul had learned about being content in all circumstances by actually having experienced all kinds of circumstances. But we know that just experiencing hard circumstances doesn't necessarily teach us anything. What Paul had also learned and experienced was how God had met him in all of those circumstances. He'd experienced not only incredible hardship but also powerful encounters with God's grace. To have God love and forgive Paul even though Paul had been persecuting and even murdering God's servants was a profound experience of grace. Paul experienced God's sustaining power when he was in prison in Philippi and then saw how God used that hard circumstance to bring the Philippian jailer and his whole household to Christ. When Paul had a consistent "thorn in his flesh" that would not leave, he experienced how God's grace could be sufficient even when and where Paul was weak. As Paul lived out his life in Christ, he experienced Christ's power.

So how about us? How do we get out of the prisons of our own self-concern, our worries about our circumstances, our anxiety for the ones we love, our bitterness, our despair, our addictions, or our fears? How can we learn to be content or even joyful in all circumstances even as we experience the full range of emotions that comes in times of hardship. At our staff meeting, Alice gave a great devotion about "choosing joy." She read a quote from Tim Hansel, a sufferer from chronic pain who wrote the book, *You Gotta Keep Dancing*. The quote described joy as a "deep settled confidence that God is in control of every aspect of my life." We see that joy comes

from a perspective that recognizes the sufficiency of Christ whatever our circumstances. But the problem is, we can't manufacture a "deep settled confidence" on our own. While sometimes that confidence comes as a gift from God, it is often something, like Paul says, that is learned—learned through experiencing God encountering us and blessing us in the midst of various circumstances. While we can't manufacture it, I believe various practices can help nurture that learning. Here are some different ideas of what can be helpful:

One is to purposely look for how God might be quietly at work in a given circumstance. I remember a friend telling me how, whenever she experienced a disappointment or hardship, she would ask "what blessing does God have for me in this?" and then intentionally be on the lookout. It's amazing how that shift of focus creates eyes to see how God might be at work. As we see God meeting us in some of these smaller disappointments we develop more confidence that God will meet us in whatever the circumstance.

A similar practice is to keep a daily gratitude list noting the ways that you saw God show up during the day in either big or small ways. I remember being encouraged through this when I was in a hard time in life where all the big circumstances of life were difficult. By noticing and being grateful for the little things, like a perfectly timed encouraging phone call from a friend, I could see that God was still present with me.

We can learn a lot by dwelling on the words of Paul and that's another practice we can engage in. Whether we're inspired or daunted by Paul's example of being content in all circumstances and being free from fear of even death, we can understand where it comes from when we read what Paul passionately believed about God. Spend time in Romans 8 where we see how thoroughly Paul believes that God is for us, how God is working all things for good for those who love him, and how impossible it is to be separated from God's love. Read Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in chapter 3 to see how enthralled Paul is with the magnitude of God's love. Maybe you don't yet have that deep settled confidence that Paul has in all these truths, but I think it can be helpful to let your mind ponder "what if these were all true?" "What would these truths mean to my life in the circumstances that I find myself in?" It's so easy to let the circumstances and associated emotions to overwhelm our minds and squelch or distort any awareness of God. Pondering the truth about God, even if you need to start with more of a "what if" than a deep settled confidence creates pathways for God to meet you and bring you tastes of his joy.

Another practice comes from that well-known verse from last week's passage which is key to nurturing the life-, joy- and peace-giving connection to Christ. "Do not worry about anything but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" As we turn to Christ in whatever the circumstance, thanking him and bringing our petitions to him, we get connected to his life and his strengthening power can flow in and through us.

To round out this prison theme I've been on for the past few weeks, I re-watched "The Shawshank Redemption." I have a hard time calling it my favorite movie when so much of it is so painful to watch—the harsh language and the even harsher violence between and against the prisoners. But what an incredible feeling when Andy escapes his prison and experiences freedom. Twenty or more years of intricate planning and patiently digging a tunnel out of his cell with a small rock hammer brought him to the freedom that was rightfully his. When you're watching the movie, that sense of release and joy is so powerful. God designed us to live life abundantly and he longs for us to draw on his strength to become free from the prisons that hold us captive even if it takes a slow process for us to break free. He longs for us to have that "deep settled confidence that God is in control of our lives." He longs for us to know that his grace is enough for us no matter what our circumstances. He longs for us to know that no matter what happens that God is for us and is working everything together for good. My prayer is that we would seek God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves and that through experiencing his love and goodness we would grow into experiencing his joy.