

“A Prisoner Preaches Rejoicing”

A Sermon Based on Philippians 4:4-9
Delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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Rejoicing. That's our task for today on this third Sunday of Advent. The Christians of ancient Rome called it Gaudete. Rejoice Sunday, based on this passage we have heard from Paul's letter to the Philippians. And what a needed word for us in these days. We want to rejoice. We want the joy of the season to fill us. That's why we go to such lengths, decorating, Gathering for parties, baking cookies, and hanging lights. All of those things we hope will help us feel the Christmas spirit.

Yet how many of us keep feeling anxiety instead? Could rejoicing be an antidote to our anxiety? I'll have more to say about that in a moment. Here, I would just remind you that the Apostle Paul wrote as the perfect messenger for anxious people.

He was someone who suffered not just feelings of anxiety, but actual, physical persecution, and not just from strangers, but from his own people. He was someone who was thrown into prison unjustly, and not just once, but many times, and not much more humane prisons like the ones we have today, but the dark, dank, smelly, rat-infested dungeons of antiquity.

How could someone who had been unjustly imprisoned write the words we have heard today? “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.”

When Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, he was a prisoner, either in Rome, Ephesus or Caesarea. He was in prison because of his faith in Jesus, and because he would not stop preaching Jesus wherever he went. The Jewish leaders in each town where he preached made lots of trouble for him, running him out of town, stoning him, having him whipped and beaten, and finally having him jailed, all because of his faith. As he wrote this letter, he was on his way to make an appeal to Caesar because he had been unjustly jailed.

So a prisoner wrote these words about rejoicing, a prisoner who had suffered many terrible things, suffering that was all undeserved, suffering while

trying to help others. Paul described his suffering in his second letter to the Corinthians. He wrote,

Five times I have received from the Jews the 39 lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my concern for all of the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24-28)

All of this suffering, experienced because he preached good news. And he says, "Rejoice..."

Is he serious? Or had he been knocked a little loopy in that stoning? Are his words like those of a Pollyanna, blissfully ignorant and disconnected from reality? I don't believe that for one second.

Our culture, and those who are accustomed to reading things superficially, may take this that way, that Paul is advising us to ignore reality and make happy. But there is something deeper here, a hard-won truth and wisdom that has been forged in suffering. Those who typically suffer nothing more than inconvenience might find comfort in a superficial reading of Paul. But those whose lives are hard, those who have known real suffering, those who suffer unjustly, those kinds of people need something much more substantial. They need something more than escape, no matter the form. They need the truth. And that is what Paul offers here. It is wisdom that grows out of the dark, hard side of life, and it is intended to speak right into that dark, hardness.

So, what is that truth? What is the wisdom Paul offers? Said simply, it is this: Peace and thankfulness in the face of suffering, unjust or otherwise, is a gift. It is a gift that comes in the presence of Jesus. It is a gift that we know, not be

figuring things out, but in realizing who is with us, right beside us. It is that gift which makes it possible for one to rejoice, even in the face of hard realities. That is the wisdom.

And it is a wisdom that we already know. What is one thing almost all of us do this time of year? Plan. We make travel plans. Either we are the ones preparing to do the traveling, or we are preparing to host those who will travel. We go to the trouble of making plans, and then traveling, for the simplest of reasons: so that we can be together, with family and friends.

That old Miller Brewing commercial is the one that has always captured the scene best, the one that begins with someone playing the piano, just the single notes of the melody, "I'll be home for Christmas." There are scenes of the snow-covered countryside, as the horse pulls the sleigh through the dusk, until it arrives at the beautiful home with lights in the windows. I miss that ad.

We look forward to the arrivals, at the airport, or in our doorway, at the bus or the train station. The anticipation builds until we finally see our family or friends and then there is the joy and the hugs, and maybe tears.

Presence is what makes it all happen, being in the presence of someone not seen for some time. The presence of loved ones makes us rejoice.

I think that is what Paul is saying to the Philippians and to us. In a quick reading of this paragraph, we might miss it. For what we read in verses 4 through 7 are general exhortations, which are directed to the entire community.

Paul urges three things

- 1) Rejoice in the Lord...
- 2) Let your gentleness be known...
- 3) Do not worry about anything...

The first two are simply stated. The third, which urges us not to worry, also positively urges us to make requests to God with thanksgiving. Paul ties up the paragraph with the promise that God's peace will guard the hearts of those who pray.

It is all very neatly structured. But between the first two exhortations and the third, Paul injects the brief and surprising affirmation, “The Lord is near.” It breaks the pattern and gets our attention.

“The Lord is near.”

That can be read in two ways. First, it can be read spatially. The Lord is near, just like this tree is near to me. Read in this way, Paul reflects the comforting language of the Psalms, where the Lord’s constant nearness reassures the brokenhearted and those who seek him. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit.” (Ps. 34:18) “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” (Ps. 145:18). It also reminds us of the promise Jesus made, “I will never leave you nor forsake you,” “I will be with you always, even to the end of the ages.”

Second, that the Lord is near can be understood temporally. Read in this way, Paul supports his exhortation with the promise of the imminent return of Jesus. Disciples are to rejoice, live gently and be free of anxiety because Jesus is coming soon, his return is just around the corner. And when he comes, Jesus will right the wrongs of the present and fulfill God’s promises for the world.

“The Lord is near.” That is the touchstone of this passage. It is the presence of Jesus which lights the way for rejoicing, for living gently and for living a life unburdened by anxiety. “Even so, come Lord Jesus.”

Now, some may hear all of this and still frown at Paul. Yes, great. The Lord is near. Hallelujah. But right now I have a spouse who is aging, and most days that is hard thing to face. You may have kids that you are responsible to raise. They’re expensive, kids are. And then there all of the other bills to pay. God help us if something unexpected comes up. Then there are the concerns of the world. The market is once again entirely unpredictable. Politics in our nation have been entirely unpredictable. Don’t worry? Rejoice? I wish I knew how to begin.”

And to an extent, that experience is true. It is universal. But Paul does not promise that our lives will be stress-free, nor that we will not know hard times, nor that our lives will never be pressure-packed. Paul does not minimize hard times.

He speaks of them vividly elsewhere in this letter. And remember the passage from his letter to the church in Corinth in which he described his sufferings and trials.

Paul is simply reminding us, in light of the nearness of the Lord, not to be overcome by anxiety, as if the events in our lives were somehow out of control, and as if the ultimate outcome of everything were in doubt. Remember whose you are and in whom all things will end.

So how can we remember? The antidote for worry is prayer, interceding for others and giving thanks. In the hard times, in all times, we are to continue making our requests known to God, surrounding those requests with our thanksgiving for all of the ways God is with us, caring for us, each day. In prayer, we are in the presence of our Lord, talking and listening. And just as all of our concerns and worries fade when we are once again in the presence of someone we love, like the greeting at the airport, so it is in prayer when we are in the presence of our beloved Lord. Even more so.

The antidote for worry is prayer. Through prayer, we find that the opposite of anxiety is not peace. The opposite of anxiety is hope.

There is hard-won wisdom here. It is truth. And it is enough. For Paul does not promise the Philippians or us that when we pray that our prayers will be answered just as we would like. How Paul must have prayed for his freedom. But he would ultimately end his life in chains. How the Philippians must have longed for tranquility. But in the short term they knew persecution.

Paul does not promise that we will be freed from suffering. What he promises us is something stronger than suffering. "The peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

In the place of paralyzing anxiety, God will grant us peace. Calm. Hope. Such a promise is likely hard for us to get a handle on. For we tend to connect peace with the absence of strife, with moments without pressure, with times when all is well.

It is hard to grasp, until you have experienced God's peace. Once you have, then, with Paul, you know that such a peace is beyond understanding.

It is a gift. And it does make you rejoice. It does cause you to live gently. It does drive away anxiety and fear. It is all a gift that comes when we spend our time lingering in the loving presence of our Lord.

The Lord is near. He does hear us. He will come again soon. Thanks be to God. AMEN.