

Rejoice, Rejoice?

Philippians 4:1-9

Whitefish UMC

October 9, 2011

- † Gathered Wednesday around a table in the Three Forks UMC Annex, Howard Hunter led us in early morning devotions. The scripture that we just read provided the basis for his reflections. I don't remember much of what he said, because I kept thinking of a little song I had learned as a child in Sunday School.
- † It goes like this: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice; Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say rejoice. Rejoice! Rejoice! Again I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.*
- † And I thought to myself, how is it possible to rejoice in the Lord when I feel so very sad? I had just received a call in the night about our dear Ruth's unexpected death, and it (along with several other tragedies) preoccupied my mind and heart.
- † Then, to my surprise, Howard led us in singing this song as a round, women first, then men. The voices of the ministers around the table, clergy and lay, resounded so beautifully. And then it became clear: not only is it possible to rejoice in the Lord in the midst of struggle and pain, it's absolutely necessary.
- † But how is this possible? Don't these words ring hollow in the face of deep grief, fear, and uncertain futures? They certainly did, this week, at least at

first, to me. And I wonder if it felt that way to Paul's first hearers of this message, the people of the little church at Philippi.

- † It's pretty clear from Paul's instructions to those two disagreeing women with unpronounceable names that the church was experiencing some difficulty. When we dig deeper into what was going on at the time, we find that Paul was writing, probably in pain and in prison, to his favorite church in his last days—before being executed by Rome for his stand for Jesus.
- † The church is facing persecution from Rome and dissension from within. So when Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice," is he just whistling past the graveyard of reality, as one preacher wonders? Yet Paul offers a continuous refrain of joy, sixteen times in four chapters of the book of Philippians.
- † Yes, it's difficult to understand how it is that we rejoice always in the context of the every day, nitty-gritty struggle to survive the living of life in these days of uncertainty and fearfulness. But let's take a look at what it means to rejoice in the Lord.
- † First, rejoice is a variant of the word "joy." Joy is considered a Christian virtue, while happiness is the virtue of the world. The difference is that happiness is external, circumstantial, depending on the things we have or can acquire or that happen to us.
- † But joy is independent of our environment and can and will persist through all circumstances. One woman quips: "Joy has a much longer shelf life than happiness." But is this just a matter of thinking positive thoughts and everything will be okay theology? No, not at all.
- † Our African American brothers and sisters have a lot to teach us about joy in the face of suffering and adversity. Dr. Henry Mitchell, author of several books on Black preaching, recalls:

- † *This is not a mind game. People may say it's not a matter of "as you think so it'll be"—"wishing will make it so." It's a fact that we need to face the negative things in our lives, but after we face them, we need to move on. We need to move on to place emphasis on things that are positive. I think for instance of my enslaved ancestors who praised God more, as it were, from the bottom of the barrel, than most of the people on top. But every now and then you find in their spirituals the fact that they really faced the realities of their difficulty.*
- † *They sang songs like "Nobody knows the Trouble I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow, nobody knows the trouble I see." But then after a while they say, "Nobody knows but Jesus. Glory hallelujah!" Or they would sing a spiritual like "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home." But before that spiritual is finished they have broken out in a positive statement: A true believer a long way from home.*
- † *Maybe you never noticed it's the same thing with the Psalms. Probably the most sorrowful song of all is the one that Jesus quoted on the cross when he said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But those of you who know the Psalms know that this is the 22nd Psalm, and whether he was singing it or just repeating it, you go on 22 verses and you find that Psalm saying, "I will praise thee in the midst of the great congregation." In both cases, in the spirituals and in the Psalms, one has fought or sung or prayed one's way through the negativities and wound up at a place of praise.*
- † *The source of our joy, then, as followers of Jesus, is God's nearness to us at all times. Whether we are tired from the realities of our life or discouraged about the future, whether we find moments that catch our breath with the beauty of the season, we can still find joy—because Jesus lives, and so can we.*

- † As another black preacher, Benjamin Reaves writes, “The secret to joy is not to look at the circumstances of your own life. Rather, look to Christ and what he has done for you and in you and to you. Our joy, our rejoicing, is to be ‘in the Lord.’ To rejoice in the Lord is to rejoice that *we are* the Lord's. And ‘in the Lord’ we enjoy: peace with God, help in temptation, the assurance of God's companionship in time of trial. And we also rejoice in the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.”
- † We can experience joy *because of*, "rejoice in the Lord," but also joy in spite of, “rejoice always.”
- † “The word always is emphatic, an active imperative, which in Greek suggests that the action should be continuous. ‘Rejoice, and keep on rejoicing,’ would be an apt paraphrase. But would it be a sensible one when it seems future hopes and dreams have crashed and burned, when catastrophic illness turns everything upside down? Do we comfort ourselves with a stiff upper lip maintaining the pretense of having it all together?
- † Paul's life is a living commentary on this verse and a personal example of ‘joy in spite of... .’ When Paul, with Silas, first preached the Gospel in Philippi, he was stripped, beaten, flogged, and thrown into prison with his feet fastened in stocks. “About midnight,” says scripture in Acts 16, “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Joy in spite of... .
- † Perhaps your life is filled with tragedy and hardship—and there is plenty to go around. Heaping supplies for those mourning the loss of loved ones, parents agonizing over troubled children. More than enough for those who have gone or are going through the heartache of divorce. For those families with children disabled with physical, emotional, or mental disorders. For those who find themselves struck with a debilitating illness. We’ve been

there, and it's tough in such situations to feel any joy. In such circumstances does the Lord really expect us to rejoice in the Lord? Yes, because "joy in spite of..." always rests on "joy because of... in the Lord.

- † Now, make no mistake and let me hasten to add that even Paul did not rejoice in the Lord *for* all circumstances. Rather, we are to rejoice or give thanks *in* all circumstances. For instance, we don't rejoice for death or for pain or for divorce or for cancer. But, by the grace of God, it is given us to rejoice in or during or after these difficult and painful circumstances. This does not mean blindness to or denial of the harsh realities of life--rather it does mean one does not let the dark realities of life blind him or her to the radiance of joy to be found in the Lord!
- † Joy because of, joy in spite of."
- † Paul uses language of rejoicing both to encourage and remind. The people of the church in Philippi have a story of faith. They have experienced God's presence in their midst. We have that story and experience, too. Paul reminds them and reminds us of this story and how it should shape our lives—together as a community and also as individuals.
- † So then, our lives, like the Philippians', ought to radiate gentleness and nonanxious prayerfulness. Our thoughts ought to overflow with "whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable." We then, are a people who, because of God's nearness, should rejoice always.
- † Can we do it? Of course. We do it today in our CROP walk as we march in solidarity with those who have so far to walk for basic necessities. We do it as we celebrate Ruth's life tomorrow, despite our sadness. We do it as we pray and hope for each of us who faces an uncertain future.

† Now—I want US to sing that old Sunday school song. Women, we’ll begin.
Men, you come in on the round. Let’s keep singing until it feels right,
because it is right. Amen.

† Sing: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.

Sources:

Benjamin Reaves, “Joy Because Of, Joy in Spite Of” <http://www.csec.org>

Henry H. Mitchell, “No Bad Days,” <http://www.csec.org>

Jill Y. Crainshaw, Feasting on the Word. 2011.