

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice!” (fn.:PHIL 4 2-7.2018.DOC)

Scripture: Philippians 4:2-7

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Our Scripture this morning comes from Paul’s letter to the congregation in the Greek city of Philippi.¹ Unlike some of the more contentious letters of Paul, this letter is filled with expressions of joy—joy in his memory of them, joy in their care for him. They had sent a gift AND a person to care for him while he, Paul, was under arrest for his mission work. In those days, a prisoner typically did not have anything beyond a jail cell. Food had to be provided by friends or sympathetic strangers. Personal items—clothes, laundry, writing materials, and so on—all came from the outside. The church in Philippi had sent money AND a person to care for Paul. And Paul expresses his thanks—his joy—at their care. This letter is a “thank-you” note.

However, on a side note, Paul also he knows that all is not well in the church in Philippi. Instead of just saying—“Everyone needs to get along.”—Paul calls out two women: Euodia and Syntyche. The fact that he calls them out is evidence that they were significant leaders in the congregation—another place where it is clear that Paul affirmed women’s leadership in the church. So, listen now to Paul’s closing words in this thank-you note, where he calls for unity and re-emphasizes the theme of joy.

Philippians 4:2-7: ² *I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.* ³ *Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

⁴ *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* ⁵ *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* ⁶ *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* ⁷ *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Repetition—one of the simplest forms of effective communication! Paul, who throughout this letter, has emphasized “joy,” concludes with a double “Rejoice.”

So, let’s consider joy. And first, let’s distinguish “joy” from “being merry.” Being merry is sort of like the experience of being under the influence—being so under the influence that you only feel good. For example, if you have had surgery recently or know someone that has, you may know what a “nerve block” is. Medically-induced, there is a temporary blocking of the nerves that send signals of pain. Many a patient has come out of surgery (myself included) with a nerve block and be fooled into thinking: “There is nothing to this surgery.” But then the nerve block fades...and, oh the pain! There is nothing for merriment.

Joy, however, is possible in pain...but not being merry. Joy touches a longing that is deeper than pleasure. So, for example, there is that display of joy in the midst of pain and fear in that stirring close to Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*. The selfish but brilliant Sydney Carton expresses joy...joy in giving his life out of love...love for Lucie Manette, who is promised to another.

¹ This sermon on the fourth Sunday of Advent was delayed by one week due to the cancellation of our service two weeks ago due to inclement weather. The theme of “joy” is typically associated with the third Sunday in Advent.

Sydney Carton will die in the guillotine—that horrific means of chopping off heads in the French Revolution. His death, however, will save Lucie Mannette and her fiancé. Cartons' last words are: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." Note that Dickens, in writing these words, knew about the effective role of repetition: "It is far, far better thing... it is far, far better rest..."

Sydney Carton's words are spoken in fear, in grief, in loss, in anticipation of a horrific death...but they are words of joy! Far, far better thing that I do...far, far better rest that I go to.

Joy is deeper than "being merry." The apostle Paul speaks of joy. Rejoice, he said. And "in case you did not hear me, Paul says it again: "Rejoice!" But here was Paul, a man in prison and under the threat of losing his life. So, joy, for Paul is not "in my circumstances," not in "my status."

Perhaps you see as I do the connection to one of the repeated stories of this season—right up there with *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Rudolph, The Red-Nose Reindeer*—Dr. Seuss' children book classic, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. It is the tale about the contrast between joy and circumstances. You may recall that the Grinch is irritated by all the happy, merry people around him—the people of "Whoville." And the Grinch attributes their joy to circumstances. They are happy because they will get lots of Christmas goodies. So, what does the Grinch do? He steals all their Christmas goodies...even all their decorations. The people of "Whoville" lose all their stuff...but on Christmas morning they still express joy. It turns out that joy is not in their circumstances.

Ted Geisel or "Dr Seuss" identified with the Grinch. In an interview following the publication of the book, he gave this explanation of how he came to write it: "I was brushing my teeth on the morning of the 26th of last December when I noticed a very Grinch-ish countenance in the mirror. It was Seuss! So I wrote about my sour friend, the Grinch, to see if I could rediscover something about Christmas that obviously I'd lost." Geisel knew the Grinch—he saw him in the mirror. Geisel even paid that extra money to get a personalized license plate for his car—his license plate read "Grinch." And his story is about joy that is deeper than circumstances.

Joy is deeper than being merry; wider than our circumstances. But, for Paul, it is not generic joy; it is not a common joy. It is joy in "in the Lord." Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord."

"In the Lord"—for Paul, that means "in Christ." By and large, every time Paul uses the word "Lord" he means Jesus, the second expression of the Trinity, not God the Creator, the Almighty. Here is where we part company with the general experience of joy—our joy is Christ-shaped.

Christ-shaped joy...now I don't have a lot of zeal about whether someone wishes me "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas." I find it implausible the suggestion that there is a plot to take Christ out of Christmas—of which, the shift to "Happy Holidays" versus "Merry Christmas" is the leading effort! I am pleased that goodwill is being expressed...whether in "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas." And as for getting Christ out of Christmas, that's already been done in America. Christians did it in Massachusetts in the 17th century. Christmas celebrations, decorations, and observances were against the law. Those Puritan Christians felt that such attention would become overly secular, non-Christian, and non-faith-based. And they were right! But outlawing Christmas is not the answer.

A better strategy is simply this: our faithful claiming and living the Christ-shaped joy of this season.

And fighting about whether we say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays” is for me not the priority. So what might that look like? A Christ-shaped joy?

Here’s one for me. Matthew Henry, a prolific writer and preacher of earlier generation, was once robbed of his wallet. Four robbers assaulted him on the way home after Henry had preached about making “joyful sound.” Matthew’s Henry’s diary describes his learning from this traumatic event. First, he was thankful that it had never happened before—four thieves assaulting him was a first. Second, he was thankful that he himself was not motivated to steal for a living—he was glad that he was the one who was robbed, not the one who did the robbing. Third, he was thankful that he was not dominated by the compelling pull to steal—to take those shortcuts. He just was not tempted to rob—and that’s a blessing. And, fourth, all he lost was some stuff—not the real stuff of his life.²

That’s joy...in the trauma of being robbed to find thanksgiving. That’s a Christ-shaped joy.

It is the perspective of Jesus’ ancestor Joseph—not his father, the husband of Mary—but the Joseph in the book of Genesis. That Joseph was maltreated by his family; he was sold into slavery in the foreign land of Egypt; he was falsely accused of sexual assault; he was put into prison...and by a strange and traumatic route, he then became a leader in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Joseph then saves the lives of those brothers and their families—the same brothers that had treated him so wrongly.

When those brothers are worried about retribution, about being punished for the horrific things that they had done, Joseph says: “What you intended for evil, God intended for good.” By Joseph being in Egypt, he was in position to rescue the entire family. And Joseph grants amnesty to his brothers—they are not punished for what they did!

That’s joy. In the trauma of being treated unfairly and painfully for years, Joseph has the heart and resolves for forgiveness. He sees God’s plan and purpose...and Joseph lets go of his rightful and just cause of seeing to the brothers suffering the consequences of their actions. That’s a Christ-shape joy.

Rejoice...rejoice in the Lord, says Paul. The writer of the book of Hebrews speak of our faithfulness in the same way—that we are to “run the race” (our life will be a struggle) like Jesus, who is the runner in front of us, the runner who “for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus ran for the joy even as it included the cross before him. And we run for the same joy, whatever the cross set before us.

Joy is my wish you this season...above that of being “merry.” You may know that song of this season, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” The lyrics of this song have been changed over and over again from the original that Hugh Martin wrote (both Judy Garland and Frank Sinatra demanded changes in the lyrics). Consider some of the changes:

² There are some summaries of this event, cited in multiple sites on the Internet, that summarize his learning in the following way: “Let me be thankful, first, because he never robbed me before; second, because although he took my purse, he did not take my life; third, because although he took all I possessed, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.” This summary, while quite uplifting, is not an accurate summary of Henry’s actual diary. And my summary is paraphrased as well. See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Matthew_Henry for an earlier citation.

Original: Have yourself a merry little Christmas.
It may be your last /Next year we may all be living in the past.
What we hear is this: Let your heart be light / Next year all our troubles will be out of sight.

Original: Faithful friends who were dear to us will be near to us no more.
What we hear is this: Faithful friends who are dear to us/will be near to us once more.

Original: If the Lord allows
What we hear: If the fates allow.

Original: From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow.
What we hear: Hang a shining star upon the highest bough.³

So have yourself a merry little Christmas now!

What Hugh Martin knew is that being merry is not always a possibility...but joy is. So rather than worry about a "Merry Christmas" or a "Happy Holidays," let's look for joy...the Christ-like joy of this season.

³ See <https://forums.stevehoffman.tv/threads/have-yourself-a-merry-little-christmas-original-lyrics.99788/> as of 12/23/18 as well as Wikipedia article on the song.