
Philippians 4: 1-9
22 Pentecost / Proper 23 / Year A
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Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson

Reading through Paul's letter to the young church at Philippi is a real joy. In fact, this is Paul's happiest letter by far and his happiness is infectious. Before the first dozen or so verses are read in this letter, we begin to feel the joy ourselves. "The dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us."ⁱ "Happiness, however, is not a word that we can understand by looking it up in the dictionary. In fact, none of the qualities of the Christian life can be learned out of a book. Something more like apprenticeship is required, being around someone who, out of years of devoted discipline shows us, by his or her entire behavior [and demeanor], what it [really] is."ⁱ Certainly verbal instruction is important, but usually an apprentice acquires skill by a regular and intimate association or relationship with a "master;" picking up the small and subtle yet absolutely essential things of the faith.

When we read what Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, we find ourselves in the company of just such a master. Paul doesn't simply tell us how we can be happy, giving us a "can't miss" approach, he simply and unmistakably IS happy. // It is interesting, however, for us to realize that none of his circumstances could have contributed to his joy. He wrote this letter from a jail cell, his ministry was under attack from other Christian leaders of his day,

and quite frankly after twenty years of hard traveling in the service of the Lord Jesus, he was tired.ⁱⁱⁱ

But what was true for Paul is no less true for you and for me. "...Circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus, the Messiah, that Paul experience[d] from the inside. For it is a life that not only happened at a certain point in history, but continues to happen, spilling out into the lives of those who receive him, and then continue to spill out all over the place. Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this 'spilling out' quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of [all] Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person."^{iv}

That joy in Paul is certainly apparent in the few verses that we heard read here this morning. In Eugene Peterson's translation of this letter, the beginning of our lesson this morning sounds this way, "My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waiver. Stay on track, steady in God."^v He goes on in his translation to really get at the heart of the joy that simply spills out of those who know and love Jesus. Beginning at verse four, "Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them."^{vi} "...Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray.

Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It is wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Summing it up friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse; Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do THAT, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.” // At the center of true happiness, of making it in this uncertain and often cruel world for Paul is trust and perseverance. To worry over circumstances is to give up on both.

As we sit here this morning the future of the world's financial markets is very uncertain. I talked a little bit about this last week. In this wake of a Wall Street meltdown, as it has been labeled, I am reminded a little bit of the feeling that swept the country and the free world in the days after September 11th. That attack was unprecedented and it spurred waves and waves of panic, fear, anger and blame. The fear for our safety dominated two presidential election cycles at the expense of all the other things that were going on in the country and around the world. And here we are again in another election cycle in full panic mode ready to

point fingers once again. Has any of the worrying, the panic, the anger and blame made any difference at all? Are we more grounded, more satisfied, happier people for allowing it to consume us? Has it made our lives worth living?

Paul had plenty to worry about when he penned this letter. As he sat in a Roman prison, had no idea what his future was going to look like. As his many detractors made inroads into the churches that he had started, he had no idea if the work that he had given his life to for over 20 years was going to last or make any significant difference at all. Yet he sat in his cell writing these words, “Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers; let God know what you are concerned about. Before you know it, a peace that surpasses all understanding will come and ease your heart and mind.” Trust and persevere, this is the root of happiness. Make prayer the focus of your life, genuine prayer, sharing all that is on your heart, and know that God will not only hear you, but take you by the hand and lead you on toward a path that is known by few. Will things turn out the way you envision them? Probably not, God rarely moves in ways that we can foresee or even understand, yet he will be there giving us the desires of our hearts and turning despair into joy.

In Jesus' Name; Amen.

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Message // Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO: 2003, Introduction to the book of Philippians pp. 2133.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid. pp. 2139