

*Joy Can Sometimes Be Hard to Find*  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26 NSRV

<sup>12</sup>I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, <sup>13</sup>so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; <sup>14</sup>and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. <sup>15</sup>Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. <sup>16</sup>These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; <sup>17</sup>the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup>What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. <sup>20</sup>It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

This August we're taking a closer look at Paul's letter to the Philippians. We're calling it *Finding Joy*. Paul's happiness and joy spills over throughout. But- considering the way the world is going these days - we probably could have titled this sermon series: "Desperate for Joy, Any Joy, Please!"

No newsflash here but *joy can sometimes be hard to find*. The Delta variant is spreading, putting lots of pressure on hospitals, and forcing us to reconsider masks. The CDC is cautioning against large gatherings - the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, the Minnesota State Fair could turn into super-spreader events. School boards across the country are having to wrestle with how to start school this year, and how to manage anxious parents as they do. On Thursday I was watching a report from California. The man said: "I turned on my water faucet this morning and nothing came out. We're bone dry!" No doubt about it, we could come up with a long list of situations in which joy can be terribly hard to find.

The Apostle Paul is in one of those situations. He's the founding pastor of a house church in Philippi. He's writing a letter to be read aloud in worship. He's writing it from a jail cell. We're not exactly sure why. Oh, Paul had been in jail before, and in Philippi, no less. He cast out a fortune-telling spirit from a slave girl; her owners got angry; a riot ensued; and the next thing you know, Paul and his co-worker Silas were behind bars. Time and again in Paul's ministry, it seems, his life and teachings bumped up against local culture and customs. And, depending on which letter was being written to what congregation, Paul often had some explaining to do - about travel plans and things like "jail."

"I want you to know," Paul assures them, "that my imprisonment is leading to some good things. In fact, it hasn't squelched the Message at all, but instead has spread it. Just so you know, I'm in prison not because of misconduct, but because of my commitment to Jesus.

The Philippians aren't exactly sure what Paul means by this, but he wants them to know, loud and clear, that he is a prisoner for Christ.

Whether a congregation is reading Philippians in the first century or today, there's a decision to make: Do we believe Paul or not? Is he telling the truth or just making excuses? Think about it: how many public figures today deny any wrongdoing whatsoever, and they do it over and over again. It's happening right now in the state of New York with Governor Andrew Cuomo. Notice that Paul doesn't make excuses. Rather, he fearlessly claims that it's not he who's in trouble, but the gospel itself. Much like in Jesus' day, it's so easy for doubters to claim: "If he really were of God, this wouldn't be happening to him." We tend to blame the victim. Paul can't erase those doubts, but he can look for joy in the midst of them. He makes a strong case for what it means to be a follower of Jesus because some of his Philippian followers are bound to be having doubts too. *If this happened to Paul, what about us?*

Joy can sometimes be hard to find. Some preachers in Philippi - Paul refers to them as "rival" preachers - have been taking advantage of the situation. With Paul out of the way, they've stepped into the spotlight, and they like it. Their motives are questionable at best. They're doing it less out of goodwill, and more out of personal gain, and who knows, maybe to boost their membership rolls.

So, what do you think, would preachers do that sort of thing today? Let us count the ways. Of course, some of the claims made by preachers are downright silly. When COVID-19 was just beginning, televangelist Kenneth Copeland, told people they didn't need to go the doctor. He was going to heal them right through their TVs...and, oh yeah, be sure to send in your offerings.

Other claims of rivals can be much more serious. This past week I heard of a pastor from a nearby state who was serving a couple of small rural parishes. One of the congregations had been overrun with members of the LCMC: Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ. The group is often at odds with the ELCA. In this case, those from the LCMC came in and stirred up every disgruntled parishioner they could find. That led to a visit from the bishop and two congregational meetings. Before it was over, sadly, the pastor felt a need to resign.

When Paul hears about rival preachers, he doesn't counterattack- not this time. He seems less concerned with their message than with their motives. They're in it for themselves! "How should I respond?" Paul ponders. "I won't get worked up about their motives - not this time - and here's why: Because every time they open their mouths, Christ is proclaimed. And that gives me joy!"

I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been as gracious as Paul, especially if I'd been the pastor of those little country churches. There are plenty of times when it's all we can do to head out the door in the morning with a smile on our faces and - as Martin Luther liked to say - "to put the most charitable construction on all that our neighbor does."

Joy can sometimes be hard to find. Yet Paul continues to look for it. He writes: "Through your faithful prayers and the generous help of Jesus, this will turn out for my deliverance. Everything God wants to do in and through me will get done."

That's a bold statement! You may not know this, but Roman prisons were not geared towards punishment. They were geared towards a trial. And that trial usually resulted in one of two things: either a person was released from prison or they were executed. Clearly, there's a lot on the line. "I will continue to speak with all boldness," says Paul, "whether by life or by death."

Suddenly there's uncertainty in the air. Keep in mind, Paul is writing to new Christians. He's doing his best to reassure them that the gospel message is trustworthy and true. They don't have to be afraid to claim the name of Jesus. Christ will watch out for them, even if their lives are on the line.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 was just ramping up. Like everybody, I was wondering how to respond. An article by Gary Burnison of Korn Ferry showed up in my email. Korn Ferry is not a religious company, it caters to businesses, but Gary Burnison shared some wise advice that day. He wrote: "In the midst of this pandemic, I'm going to connect with as many people as possible each day, and I'm always going to keep the end in mind."

One morning Burnison took his dog for a walk. He came upon a stretch of pavement that literally stopped him in his tracks. There was a big crack in it. There was a message scrawled in chalk with these words: "Everything will be OK." It was probably written by a child. The "O" in OK had been turned into a smiley face. Burnison remembered back to a time years before. His five-year-old son, Jack, had a serious health concern. He was in the hospital needing surgery. The family had all been calm the night before, but when they got up at the crack of dawn, the gravity of the situation had begun to sink in. The nurse came to put a needle in Jack's arm. His eyes got very wide. Jack turned to his father and asked, "Daddy, will everything be OK?" Daddy responded with as much confidence as he could summon, "Yes, it's going to be okay."

As Paul languishes in a Roman cell, that's what he's telling the Philippians. "Everything is going to be OK. This will turn out for my deliverance, and for your benefit too." It's hard to understand what Paul is saying at this point. Maybe he isn't sure either. Paul goes on, "To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I live, I've got work still to do. If I die, I'll go to be with Christ." Is Paul vacillating? He seems determined to get back to Philippi. He'd started church. He feels close to them. But now we're not sure if he's going to make it. Still, he wants to reassure them: *live or die, everything will be OK!*

Joyce Newman of Zumbro died this past week. Her funeral is tomorrow. Joyce lost her beloved David in late March. Their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary was coming up in the middle of June. David was determined to hang on, but he couldn't quite make it. As a consolation, David and Joyce decided in advance to count their dating days too and make it an even 70.

For the last few months, Joyce hadn't been feeling well either. She went to the doctor. They found a blockage. They tried surgery, but she was full of cancer. There wasn't much the doctors could do. I went by the hospital. What surprised me is how at peace Joyce was about her condition. From the first day on, she expressed resolve, "I won't be leaving the hospital, Pastor Vern. Read me the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It's my favorite." In her own sort of way, Joyce was saying, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I live, I get to spend time with my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. If I die, I'll be in the loving arms of Jesus and I'll be with David again." As much Joyce loved her grandkids, her mind was

made up: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.” *Everything will be OK.* And nine days later, Joyce was gone.

Joy can sometimes be hard to find. Then again, sometimes it shows up in the unlikeliest of places. And we have to adjust our sights to see it. I followed a little of the story of Simone Biles, the decorated Olympic gymnast. Early in the competition she looked troubled. Then she was pulling out of events, opening up about her mental health. Her mind and body weren't working together. She had something called “the twisties” that didn't allow her to rotate her body effectively. On top of everything, Simone Biles felt like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. But she was a loyal teammate. She watched and cheered from the sidelines. When her teammates did well, it seemed every bit as important to her as if she had done it herself.

As you probably know, on the last day of competition Simone Biles ended up winning a bronze medal for the balance beam. Everyone stood up and cheered, and we got a lump in our throats. I wouldn't be surprised if someday that metal becomes her favorite.

After Simone Biles had won, a commentator shared a thought from sportscaster Johnny Miller: “People shouldn't be judged on what they accomplish. They should be judged on what they overcome.”

How true for Simone Biles struggling with the balance beam. How true for the Apostle Paul languishing in a Roman prison. Joy can sometimes be hard to find. But these two, like so many others, had overcome so much. And in the process, they had found joy. Amen.

This is a stretch for many of us. As American Christians, we regularly see God on our side, which means, of course, that God is not on the side of our enemies. But is that the Jesus you know?

It's frighteningly easy to wedge Jesus into our political views, whether for Christian Nationalism or something else. We must be careful. As far as I know, Jesus never ran for office. He never stumped for a political candidate. He never pledged allegiance to a country or a flag. That's not to say these things are unimportant. But to what level do we raise them? For some, it seems, they become the object of ultimate allegiance, and in the process, they become political idolatry.

Jesus focus was not on country but on the kingdom of God. A few chapters after his run-in with the Herodians and Pharisees, he explored a hard question with his followers: “When you someday stand before God, how will you be judged?? Jesus responds: “When I was hungry, did you give me something to eat? When I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink? When

I was sick, did you care for me? When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?” Jesus puts it bluntly: “As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.” How are we to live as Christians? Plain and simple, not by grabbing power at all costs. We are to imitate Jesus and walk in his ways.



Shortly after the chaos at the Capitol on January 6, Tish Harrison Warren wrote an article in Christianity Today. She's an Anglican priest. She urged: "[As followers of Jesus] we have to take up the slow work of repair, of re-forming our faith and our churches around the deep and unchanging truths of Christ. We must reconstruct communities where we can know and speak truth, serve the needy and the poor, love our neighbors, learn to be poor in spirit, rejoice in suffering, and witness to the light of Christ amid the darkness."

Warren got even more specific: "This work will be frustratingly small and local, under the radar, and away from the headlines. It will feel paltry and unimportant in the face of raging nations and widespread ecclesial and national decay. It will be long, risky, and uncertain. But in that meek and humble place, [hopefully] we can again find [our way to Christ], the true Light of the World."

I'm challenged by these thoughts. Here's the question: Can we follow Jesus, even it means going against our favorite politician or political party? As I see it, God doesn't want Republican-followers or Democratic-followers. God wants Jesus-followers.

At some point, Christians will have to choose between God or Caesar. And when that time comes, let's pray that our ultimate allegiance will be to Christ. Amen.