

Joy Begins with God's Good Work in Us
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

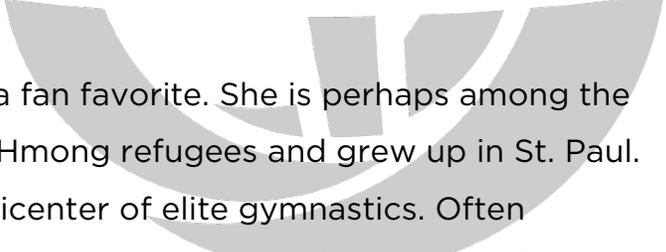
Philippians 1:1-11 NRSV

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

I love the Olympics! Anyone else? I love that every four years sports that get little attention any other time come front and center for all the world to watch. I love the way NBC tells heartwarming stories about these athletes and tells us about the challenges they've overcome to get to where they are today. I love watching a great competition; and in the end those who come in second or even dead last congratulate the winner, regardless of what country they come from; and that the winners reach out to those they defeat to offer consolation and congratulations for a race well run. These athletes realize that they are competitors and not enemies, that they share a common craft and a common world. They show us again and again that there is much to gain by sharing our humanity with each other. It could seem impractical, but imagine if foreign and domestic politics could demonstrate some of this same maturity?



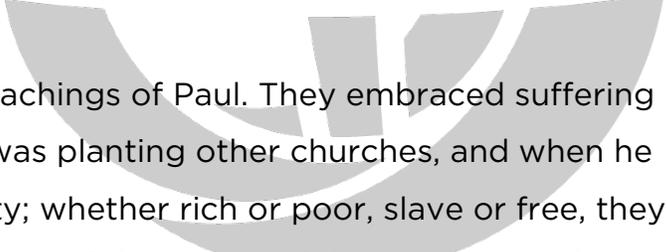
In the last week, gymnast Suni Lee has become a fan favorite. She is perhaps among the unlikeliest of Olympic stars. She's a daughter of Hmong refugees and grew up in St. Paul. Last time I checked Minnesota was not at the epicenter of elite gymnastics. Often gymnasts' families have to move across the country to help their athlete pursue their dreams. But Suni honed her balance beam skills on a homemade wooden beam her dad built her in her backyard and has been part of the same gym since she first learned to do cartwheels. Her story inspires us and makes us feel tremendous joy.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is steeped in joy. Paul isn't just happy that the Philippians have joined in the gospel of Christ and the church. Paul's joy for the Philippians touches the heart, mind, and guts. As you hear his letter to them you can tell just how proud Paul is of this little church. His letter to them is written from prison. And despite his circumstances, his letter is a celebration of and encouragement to a community who has inspired him.

Act 16 tells us that the church started when Paul and his companion Silas met a group of women by the river's edge outside the city gate in Philippi. These women were already praying to God before Paul and Silas arrived. In other words, God's good work had already begun before Paul got there. Paul tended the seeds of faith by preaching and sharing in the gospel with them. Lydia, a wealthy cloth merchant, along with her family were some of the first in Philippi to be baptized and become followers of Christ. From there, the church grew. Perhaps it started meeting in Lydia's house, with her family, a few neighbors, their servants and slaves, and a couple of her customers from other parts of the region.

This would make for an unusual gathering even by today's standards, but the broad collection of people was a central feature of the emerging early church. The people in the congregation weren't all the same. The early church upended the "normal" social order. People from different religions, ethnic groups, political allegiances, social and economic classes all found the gospel of Jesus compelling. More than that - they found new life in this kind of community. Paul's letter puts a special emphasis on how Christians are to live together and how together the church shares in God's grace through living the gospel.





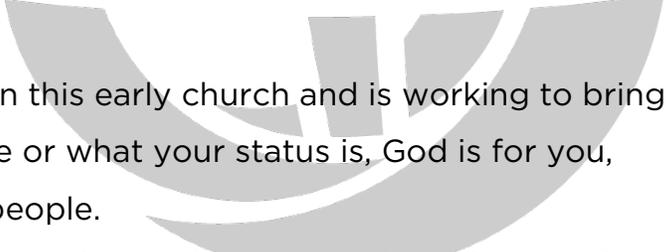
They committed to the ways of Jesus and the teachings of Paul. They embraced suffering in Christ's name. They supported Paul when he was planting other churches, and when he was in prison. From their various places in society; whether rich or poor, slave or free, they gave testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit at work among them. It's no wonder Paul felt such joy!

As the church planter, Paul wasn't the one to perform for the people, but rather he equipped these new Christians to live out the gospel. In fact, Paul rarely stuck around long enough with any one church to see just how the gospel would be embodied in them. That was for God to do and the community to discover along the way. Paul was like the Olympic coach watching with joy from the sidelines as the church became what God created it to be, "from the first day" that is, the first day when the gospel of salvation in Christ was preached and received by the Philippians "until the day of Jesus Christ", in which Christ will return in glory to judge and save the world.

These two times mark the bookends of the life of the church. Paul lived with eager anticipation that Christ would come again before his death, and yet we continue to wait. We live in between these times, between the time we remember and live by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, and the time hoped for in which Christ comes again to redeem and reconcile the whole world. According to Paul, how we live as the church matters deeply. "I am confident of this", he writes, "that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ." God, who brings grace and salvation continues to be at work in and among us, even as we wait in hope for the completion of God's salvation.

Here's the thing...I wonder if it would have felt as joyful or if the good news would have been really good news if this new community of faith had been made up of people who were more similar to each other than different? Would there be as much joy, as much grace, as much gospel to experience if everyone were by in large the same? I'm not so sure.





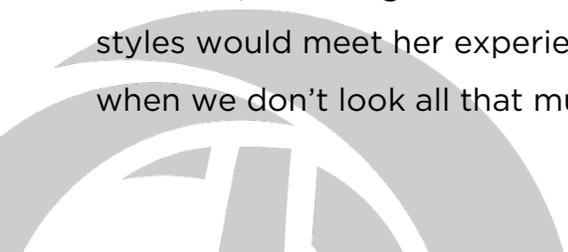
Perhaps part of the good work that God began in this early church and is working to bring to completion now is that no matter who you are or what your status is, God is for you, that God's salvation in Jesus is extending to all people.

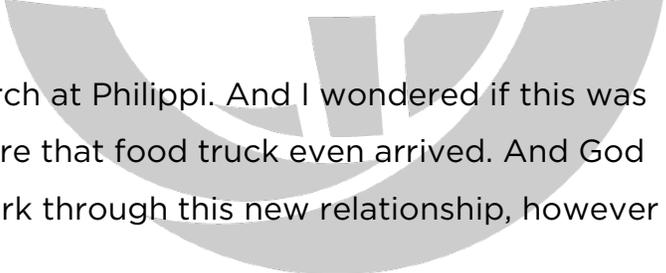
As a church we have sensed God working in us to embrace this in a number of ways - by opening our doors to South Sudanese refugees and the LGBTQ community as an RIC church; by building relationships with Luther and UMR students and faculty and by showing up with the food truck every Thursday night in SE Rochester.

God has been planting these seeds of good work in us all along and I'm so grateful that we continue to tend to them. As we rejoice in the ways God works in us to be this kind of church, I can't help but wonder what other ways we can share in the gospel with those we're in relationship with. What might it look like if the lines between those we serve and those we worship with blurred a bit more, so that we might reflect something of the Philippians church? In some of Paul's other letters, he urges the church that there be no distinction between groups, but that we see ourselves as one in Christ Jesus. How might God be planting seeds for us to create space in our worship and ministries for new communities of people?

This summer, Open Table partnered with the Meadow Park Initiative, which is running a day camp for kids in the Meadow Park apartments near the fairgrounds. We have been serving lunch once a week for their 20-30 participants. I was driving the truck and serving with our intern Mia this week. As we were serving lunch, one of the young outreach workers came up to the window and asked about who we were. I explained that we were part of Zumbro and told her where the church was. She was enthusiastic when she heard we were a church. She told us she was looking for a new church and expressed interest in coming to worship.

As I invited her and wanted her to feel so welcome as I did, I will admit I had questions bubbling up in the back of my mind. She is young and single and Black. Not necessarily our core demographic this morning. Her church experiences have been in Pentecostal churches, not liturgical ones. I started to wonder how our relatively subdued worship styles would meet her experience of God, how we might receive her and she receive us when we don't look all that much alike. And then I thought of this passage, and the joy





Paul experienced in the rich diversity of the church at Philippi. And I wondered if this was something that God was already beginning before that food truck even arrived. And God was already beginning to accomplish a good work through this new relationship, however God chose to do it.

I have this sticker on the fridge at home that says “Keep Church Weird”, and when I saw this sticker as I came home on Thursday evening I was reminded that it’s God’s good pleasure, God’s plan that the church be unusual, weird even. We’re not called to have the same distinctions as so much of the rest of the world. We’re called to find our unity in the gospel of Jesus and sort out the rest in relationship. So I shouldn’t question who God might call to worship in this place, or want to serve alongside us, or be concerned about who might find the way we are living out the gospel compelling. Our call is just to keep church weird enough that people might hear the gospel and respond in faith. It has happened for us and it happens again and again. And when God acts again with such grace and weirdness, it too will bring us joy. Amen.

