

July 20, 2009
Park Road Baptist Church
Maria Hanlin

Text: Phil. 1:3-14, 3:1, 4:4-7
Subject: Joy

THE PILGRIMAGE OF PAUL FINDING JOY IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Have you ever visited anyone in prison? I'll never forget my first trip to jail. I was 22 years old and training to be a Methodist missionary. It was the Lorton Virginia Penitentiary where 97% of the men were African American even though Whites were by far the greater percentage of the population. You see, racism was alive and well in the penal system in 1981.....just like it still can be today. I tried to be comfortable on that trip inside locked doors and crashing gates, but it was hard not to be intimidated as the men stared at me and I heard the doors slam locked behind me. Prisons are the kind of place that you dread visiting and when you leave, it is with a sense of relief.

I can only imagine how intimidating it must have been for Paul when he was thrown into a Roman prison, which was not known for its sanitary living conditions. Unlike our city jails and prisons, Paul did not have electricity or a sink or shower; even food was not always provided. He was often bound in chains. You need to know, Paul had quite a record. In Philippi, Paul was beaten and arrested for sharing his faith. Then he was arrested in Ceasera, again in Ephesus, and finally in Rome. (You see, there were a lot more Christians thrown into jail in his day than their percentage of the population.) Most scholars believe Paul wrote this letter to the Church at Philippi from prison around 62 – 63 AD where he was awaiting trial to see if he would be executed. Scholars believe this was Paul's last trip to jail because it was in this same time period that Paul was beheaded under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Nero.

From his prison cell Paul writes this letter to the church at Philippi and in only four short chapters, Paul mentions joy 14 times, including that beloved scripture we heard this morning, "Rejoice in the Lord (when?) always; again I say, rejoice!" Which makes me want to say, "Paul, are you crazy?" Then again, maybe it's Paul's kind of craziness we need in this difficult time in our nation – in our world – and maybe in your life. If Paul can write this letter of joy from the stench of a Roman prison, maybe Paul can teach us something about finding joy in the midst of any difficult circumstance you are facing.

When is the last time you felt real joy? In this letter, Paul gives us three ways to find joy no matter what our situation. First, Paul found joy in the presence of God. Even going to prison was a pilgrimage for Paul because he found God there.

How many of you are facing a problem in your life? We all face problems, don't we? What are the circumstances in your life that are really hard, that keep you awake at night and cause you worry and pain? If you are not facing any major problem now, just wait, they'll find you again. (I thought I'd uplift you today with that good news!) Have you ever noticed that when we focus on a problem, worry and fret about it, that problem grows bigger and Bigger and BIGGER until it is all we can see and it absolutely

overwhelms us. However, if like Paul, we first focus on God instead of the problem, it pales in significance. Paul knew that when God is with us, then we have joy even in the middle of a recession, in the midst of losing a job, in a prison awaiting the death penalty. *Joy is an infallible sign of the presence of God.*

The second key to joy is believing that God will use the difficult circumstances in our lives for good. Paul says, "I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News." (1:12) Excuse me? Paul has been beaten, ridiculed, imprisoned, shipwrecked....and yet he finds joy because he knew God would use even those circumstances for good? Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Rome, "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:38). Paul did not believe God had put him in prison, but Paul knew God was with him and could work even through this difficult situation for good.

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Joy doesn't mean we won't suffer sorrow or pain, but rather in the midst of it, we still know joy. Too often I let the little things of life rob me of joy because I am so focused on my own problems and my little world. Have you ever resembled that remark? Not only does that make us miserable, it makes everyone else around us pretty miserable as well. On the other hand, the most profound witnesses to their faith are those who let the light of Christ shine through them even when they are suffering through tough times. As a Buddhist priest said, "The point of the pilgrimage is to improve oneself by enduring and overcoming difficulties." (pg 149, The Art of Pilgrimage.)

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What about you? Do you want joy in your personal life? Don’t focus on yourself, your pain and problems. Instead, focus on others. John Ortberg says, “True joy comes only to those who have devoted their lives to something greater than personal happiness.”

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And as Christians, it is how we find joy in our own lives when we minister to others. Just like Paul found joy when Epaphroditus visited him in his difficult circumstances, so our relationship with God and with each other is what sustains all of us in the darkest times of our lives. It’s when a church member shows up to pray with you in the hospital. It’s when you send a card or make a phone call to tell someone you are thinking for them. It’s when a member from your Bible study brings you meatloaf when you’ve had a difficult time. And even though you don’t like meatloaf....there is joy when you see your friend at your front door.

Let me tell you about Mabel. Mabel lived in a state run convalescent hospital that was large, understaffed and on the brightest of days, seemed dark inside with its overwhelming smell of sickness and urine. It’s the kind of place that you dread visiting and when you leave, it is with a sense of relief. A minister, Tom, tells about how he visited congregation members who lived at that state run convalescent home because they couldn’t afford a private nursing home. One day when Tom was visiting, he noticed at the end of the hallway an old woman who was strapped into her wheelchair. She was blind and half of her face was eaten away by cancer. A running sore on her cheek had

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When Pastor Tom first saw Mabel, he tried to slip by her wheelchair and avoid her but accidentally brushed her arm. When he did, Mabel reached out, touched him and said to this man she had never met, “I hope you know how much Jesus loves you.” Well, no matter how much of a hurry you are in, if you are a pastor and someone says that to you, you have to stop. For the next 3 years, Pastor Tom made a pilgrimage to visit Mabel each month. It didn’t take Tom long to realize that Mabel had a lot to teach him. So Tom started taking a pen and paper to write down things she would say.

Thinking how lonely it must be day after day to lie alone in a hospital bed, Tom asked, “Mabel, what do you think about when you lay here?” She answered with a smile on her face and joy in her voice, “I think about my Jesus.” Tom said he sat there for a moment and thought how difficult it was for him – a pastor – to think about Jesus for five minutes. So he asked, “Mabel, what do you think about Jesus?” She answered, “I think about how good he’s been to me.” He’s been awfully good to me in my life, you know.” Then Mabel began to sing an old hymn, I’ll bet many of you know it, “Jesus is all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all. He is my strength from day to day, without him I would fall. When I am sad to him I go, No other one can cheer me so. When I am sad, He makes me glad, He’s my friend.” As he listened to this 89 year old invalid sing this song, Tom knew he was in the very presence of God. Mabel’s joy and her witness to her faith made Tom want to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground.

As you leave here today to begin a new week, be aware of the presence of God. Look for holy ground for it is all around us when we open our eyes of faith. That is what makes the entire journey of life a sacred pilgrimage. God loves you no matter what, and nothing can change that. No matter what you’ve ever done, no matter what you ever face. When you go forth, decide to focus – not on your problems and the difficult circumstances all of us face in life, but instead focus on loving God and one another.

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PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God, thank you for caring about the problems and pain we experience in our lives. Thank you that you are with us in the midst of anything we ever face. Thank you that every day of our lives is a sacred pilgrimage when we live it for you. Bless Pastors Russ and Amy, Jackson and Bennett. May they feel your presence, and our presence, this day and find great joy knowing how much you – and how much we – love them. Send us forth with open eyes to minister to those in our lives who need to know your joy. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURE

Philippians is one of my favorite books of the Bible. Do you know where the Apostle Paul was when he wrote this letter to the church at Philippi? In prison waiting to hear if we would receive the death penalty. Philippians is really a thank you letter from Paul to this church that he founded. I thought it most appropriate to preach from this book of the Bible on my first Sunday here at Park Road Baptist Church, because I am so thankful for you, for the incredible difference you make in our community, and for the honor to be partners in ministry with you. Let us hear these words of Paul in this letter he wrote to the church at Philippi.

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Benediction: 4:4-7

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Park Road Baptist Church
Maria Hanlin

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Subject: Joy

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When is the last time you felt real joy? In this letter, Paul gives us three ways to find joy no matter what our situation. First, Paul found joy in the presence of God. Even going to prison was a pilgrimage for Paul because he found God there.

How many of you are facing a problem in your life? We all face problems, don't we? What are the circumstances in your life that are really hard, that keep you awake at night and cause you worry and pain? If you are not facing any major problem now, just wait, they'll find you again. (I thought I'd uplift you today with that good news!) Have you ever noticed that when we focus on a problem, worry and fret about it, that problem grows bigger and Bigger and BIGGER until it is all we can see and it absolutely

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The second key to joy is believing that God will use the difficult circumstances in our lives for good. Paul says, "I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News." (1:12) Excuse me? Paul has been beaten, ridiculed, imprisoned, shipwrecked....and yet he finds joy because he knew God would use even those circumstances for good? Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Rome, "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:38). Paul did not believe God had put him in prison, but Paul knew God was with him and could work even through this difficult situation for good.

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PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God, thank you for caring about the problems and pain we experience in our lives. Thank you that you are with us in the midst of anything we ever face. Thank you that every day of our lives is a sacred pilgrimage when we live it for you. Bless Pastors Russ and Amy, Jackson and Bennett. May they feel your presence, and our presence, this day and find great joy knowing how much you – and how much we – love them. Send us forth with open eyes to minister to those in our lives who need to know your joy. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURE

Philippians is one of my favorite books of the Bible. Do you know where the Apostle Paul was when he wrote this letter to the church at Philippi? In prison waiting to hear if we would receive the death penalty. Philippians is really a thank you letter from Paul to this church that he founded. I thought it most appropriate to preach from this book of the Bible on my first Sunday here at Park Road Baptist Church, because I am so thankful for you, for the incredible difference you make in our community, and for the honor to be partners in ministry with you. Let us hear these words of Paul in this letter he wrote to the church at Philippi.

Benediction: 4:4-7

July 20, 2009
Park Road Baptist Church
Maria Hanlin

Text: Phil. 1:3-14, 3:1, 4:4-7
Subject: Joy

THE PILGRIMAGE OF PAUL FINDING JOY IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Have you ever visited anyone in prison? I'll never forget my first trip to jail. I was 22 years old and training to be a Methodist missionary. It was the Lorton Virginia Penitentiary where 97% of the men were African American even though Whites were by far the greater percentage of the population. You see, racism was alive and well in the penal system in 1981.....just like it still can be today. I tried to be comfortable on that trip inside locked doors and crashing gates, but it was hard not to be intimidated as the men stared at me and I heard the doors slam locked behind me. Prisons are the kind of place that you dread visiting and when you leave, it is with a sense of relief.

I can only imagine how intimidating it must have been for Paul when he was thrown into a Roman prison, which was not known for its sanitary living conditions. Unlike our city jails and prisons, Paul did not have electricity or a sink or shower; even food was not always provided. He was often bound in chains. You need to know, Paul had quite a record. In Philippi, Paul was beaten and arrested for sharing his faith. Then he was arrested in Ceasera, again in Ephesus, and finally in Rome. (You see, there were a lot more Christians thrown into jail in his day than their percentage of the population.) Most scholars believe Paul wrote this letter to the Church at Philippi from prison around 62 – 63 AD where he was awaiting trial to see if he would be executed. Scholars believe this was Paul's last trip to jail because it was in this same time period that Paul was beheaded under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Nero.

From his prison cell Paul writes this letter to the church at Philippi and in only four short chapters, Paul mentions joy 14 times, including that beloved scripture we heard this morning, "Rejoice in the Lord (when?) always; again I say, rejoice!" Which makes me want to say, "Paul, are you crazy?" Then again, maybe it's Paul's kind of craziness we need in this difficult time in our nation – in our world – and maybe in your life. If Paul can write this letter of joy from the stench of a Roman prison, maybe Paul can teach us something about finding joy in the midst of any difficult circumstance you are facing.

When is the last time you felt real joy? In this letter, Paul gives us three ways to find joy no matter what our situation. First, Paul found joy in the presence of God. Even going to prison was a pilgrimage for Paul because he found God there.

How many of you are facing a problem in your life? We all face problems, don't we? What are the circumstances in your life that are really hard, that keep you awake at night and cause you worry and pain? If you are not facing any major problem now, just wait, they'll find you again. (I thought I'd uplift you today with that good news!) Have you ever noticed that when we focus on a problem, worry and fret about it, that problem grows bigger and Bigger and BIGGER until it is all we can see and it absolutely

overwhelms us. However, if like Paul, we first focus on God instead of the problem, it pales in significance. Paul knew that when God is with us, then we have joy even in the middle of a recession, in the midst of losing a job, in a prison awaiting the death penalty. *Joy is an infallible sign of the presence of God.*

The second key to joy is believing that God will use the difficult circumstances in our lives for good. Paul says, "I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News." (1:12) Excuse me? Paul has been beaten, ridiculed, imprisoned, shipwrecked....and yet he finds joy because he knew God would use even those circumstances for good? Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Rome, "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:38). Paul did not believe God had put him in prison, but Paul knew God was with him and could work even through this difficult situation for good.

Do you know what Paul did? Paul uses his time in jail to preach to the prison guards. Now remember, Paul was thrown into prison in the first place for what? Preaching! Paul really was crazy, it seems, as he "dared to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear" (1:14). That's what I call "chutzpah." Paul writes, "How else would he have such an opportunity to share Christ with the Roman soldiers?" If I were Paul, I'd be having a pity party. Instead, Paul is throwing a party, singing and sharing his faith joyfully with the prison guards who bound him up in chains.

Paul reminds me of another prisoner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was known for his profound witness during World War II. Bonhoeffer is one of the few Christian pastors in Germany who had the chutzpah to preach against Hitler. As a result, Bonhoeffer was deported to a Nazi concentration camp. An officer said, "Bonhoeffer always seemed to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least little incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive." Bonhoeffer, like Paul, died for his faith, yet even in facing death, he found joy. Why? Because Bonhoeffer knew that true joy comes to those who give their lives to something greater than themselves. Other prisoners in the concentration camp took courage that even in the midst of the darkest circumstances imaginable, Christ's light shone through Bonhoeffer in such a profound way. In his last letter from his jail cell to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is certain that....danger and distress can only drive us closer to God."

Joy doesn't mean we won't suffer sorrow or pain, but rather in the midst of it, we still know joy. Too often I let the little things of life rob me of joy because I am so focused on my own problems and my little world. Have you ever resembled that remark? Not only does that make us miserable, it makes everyone else around us pretty miserable as well. On the other hand, the most profound witnesses to their faith are those who let the light of Christ shine through them even when they are suffering through tough times. As a Buddhist priest said, "The point of the pilgrimage is to improve oneself by enduring and overcoming difficulties." (pg 149, The Art of Pilgrimage.)

There's a third way Paul finds joy in the face of his pilgrimage in prison. Paul found joy from the ministry of other believers. In many ways, Philippians is a thank you letter

from Paul to this church at Philippi that he had founded. Do you know what the church did? While Paul was sitting in the stench of prison awaiting trial, this church not only had believers who were praying for him, the people of Philippi actually sent one of the members of their congregation, Epaphroditus, to be with Paul in prison. That was very dangerous because it was a two month journey from Philippi to Rome. The church said, "Epaphroditus, you go and help Paul on behalf of us all. Don't worry about anything here. We'll take care of your family, your business, mow the grass, feed the pets, pay your bills." Epaphroditus almost died on this mission trip as we find out, "he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me" (2:30). Epaphroditus was willing to risk death because he wasn't just focused on himself but outward focused on the needs of others.

What about you? Do you want joy in your personal life? Don't focus on yourself, your pain and problems. Instead, focus on others. John Ortberg says, "True joy comes only to those who have devoted their lives to something greater than personal happiness."

Park Road Baptist, how I thank God for you! From your founding in 1950 under the prophetic ministry of Charlie Milford you have championed issues of racism, poverty and war. Russ and Amy's powerful ministry is an example to other clergy around the city, as you have welcomed the homeless, the hungry, and those of other faiths. You open up your buildings to Crisis Assistance Ministry to serve those in our community who are facing difficult circumstances in their lives. You then welcomed Mecklenburg Ministries, gave us space for our offices, our Youth Service days, our clergy lunches and Community Conversations. And if that wasn't enough, you then construct a wall in your chapel to open up a Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry. What an inspiration you are to every church in our city. I called the Observer to say, here is a church you should feature as one who is making such a difference, especially in this difficult economic time. This is what it means to be the church!

And as Christians, it is how we find joy in our own lives when we minister to others. Just like Paul found joy when Epaphroditus visited him in his difficult circumstances, so our relationship with God and with each other is what sustains all of us in the darkest times of our lives. It's when a church member shows up to pray with you in the hospital. It's when you send a card or make a phone call to tell someone you are thinking for them. It's when a member from your Bible study brings you meatloaf when you've had a difficult time. And even though you don't like meatloaf....there is joy when you see your friend at your front door.

Let me tell you about Mabel. Mabel lived in a state run convalescent hospital that was large, understaffed and on the brightest of days, seemed dark inside with its overwhelming smell of sickness and urine. It's the kind of place that you dread visiting and when you leave, it is with a sense of relief. A minister, Tom, tells about how he visited congregation members who lived at that state run convalescent home because they couldn't afford a private nursing home. One day when Tom was visiting, he noticed at the end of the hallway an old woman who was strapped into her wheelchair. She was blind and half of her face was eaten away by cancer. A running sore on her cheek had

distorted her jaw so that she drooled constantly. Mabel was 89 years old and had been in that hospital for 25 years.

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