

“REJOICING TOGETHER”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Philippians 1:3-11

October 21, 2018

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

As most of you know, our older daughter is getting married next spring. She's excited, and we love her fiancé and, more importantly, we feel that they are good for each other. A lovely celebration is being planned. So it's a happy thing, in and of itself. But I've noticed something interesting: as we've shared the news and the plans with other folks, including many of you, I've found that a part of the joy is in the sharing. I think that's because there's nearly always a response that consists of smiles, interest, gladness and good wishes. Sometimes it's because people know her, sometimes it's because people love us and are glad for us, sometimes it's because people identify with the experience of being parents of a bride or groom, and sometimes, perhaps, it's just the general joy of a wedding. But there's a kind of connection that I've become aware of in these conversations. I can only describe it as a sharing in the joy. And it *adds to the joy*. Maybe it's true what they say, that a trouble shared is halved and a joy shared is doubled.

This is the kind of “everyday grace” that makes me grateful to be part of a community of faith: the reminder that our joys – and our hopes and worries and prayers, too - are heard, understood, honored, shared, and supported. I hear that same gratitude in the beginning of the letter from Paul to the Christians in Philippi: he cherishes the relationship he has with these folks. They have shared his joys and his troubles, and he theirs. He feels their support and even though he is not able to be there with them, he wants to support them. In verse 7 he says “you hold me in your heart.” Interestingly the grammar there is kind of unclear. It could also be translated “I hold you in my heart.” The very ambiguity of it suggests a mutuality and sharing of love and concern.

Paul is not writing only about personal blessings and concerns, of course, but about the calling he – and his fellow believers – have: to share the gospel story and strengthen the faith community and demonstrate the love of God in the world. This is always what Paul is about in his communications with the various congregations he helped to found and nurture in different cities. His letters often include something like this passage, which we read as his prayer for the friends he writes to, his gratitude and his hopes for them. We'll take a look at some similar passages in his other letters over the next couple of weeks.

But these words from the beginning of his message to the Philippian Christians really stand out for the way they are infused with joy – which is in fact a recurring theme of the whole letter.

The context is NOT that everything is great. Paul is writing from prison. You almost miss him saying that, because his words are so filled with gratitude and confidence and love and hope... because the whole tone is one of joy. The folks at Philippi are experiencing some challenges themselves – Paul refers to opposition they are facing and to their suffering a little later in his letter, and urges them to be strong and united in the face of those difficulties. But to Paul’s mind, the joy that comes from the shared connection as friends in Christ *far* outweighs any hardships life may bring. Not only that, it is a source of strength for facing those hardships.

Another thing to realize is that when Paul is writing to a group of Christians, he’s always thinking about their calling, about their work of ministry, and the day-to-day taking up the cross and following Jesus. My idea of joy (and maybe yours, too) is often leisure, fun, and escape. What’s on Paul’s mind – his hopes for the Philippians – is nothing like that. He’s not praying for a lovely retreat or a peaceful retirement or a safe enclave for them: he wants them to have a strong and growing faith, a vibrant witness, a healthy church, a ministry that makes a difference, a life together that glorifies God. None of that happens without intention, commitment, sacrifice, and work ... but Paul is convinced that there is joy in that journey.

I’ve read and heard Isaiah 35 many times – probably you have too. It’s another scripture passage noted for its mood of joy. But I never noticed before how it is not exactly about having reached that state of peace and justice, of returning home, of healing, of an end to fear. It’s more expectant, it’s about a journey toward that hope. Isaiah (like Paul) writes with confidence because he’s convinced that ultimately the hope is in God. But there can hardly be any doubt that the journey asks something of us too. We are asked to be strong, to do justice, to love peace, to keep on walking the road together. And to find joy in the journey.

The journey is a journey together. Relationship is at the heart of it. Churches (including ours) do many, many things. We have programs, goals, buildings, teams and committees, meetings, classes, activities, missions. We make statements, listen to sermons, sing songs, offer prayers. We do some things well, other things the best we can. We give our money, our time, our skills, our knowledge. But nothing we do, however worthy or important or well-meant, however well-done, can be an adequate substitute for the relationships of love and caring that make the church the church. As Paul wrote to another congregation, without love, all our work and giving and believing is nothing.

Paul’s prayer of gratitude for these people he loves is very personal, yet at the same time he has a big perspective, that encompasses the past, the present, and the future. He looks back with gratitude and forward with hope. He finds strength for his present moment in the love that encourages him. And it fills him with joy that he and they can share in what he knows is the larger story of Christ’s church. The challenges of the moment are less real to him than the love of Christ and of his sisters and brothers.

In Stewardship Season we focus a lot on our giving, on the ways we can serve, on the gifts each one of us has whether they are for leadership or for loving kids or for taking care of our building. We think about the challenges we face. We pray to be able to “meet the budget” or find people to be elders and deacons. We thank God for our material blessings and express some of our gratitude by making pledges.

This year, as we think about our congregation’s ministry, I hope we may also be “constantly praying with joy.” I hope we might pray for “knowledge and insight” to “determine what is best.” Let’s pray, too, as Paul did, for love to “overflow more and more.” And as he did, let us also commit ourselves to the nurturing and cherishing of the relationships that make us the church.

And especially I invite us all to echo Paul’s prayer of gratitude for what it means to be able to rejoice – as well as grieve – together. For the personal connections through which shared joy and love and hope flow among us. For the ministry we are dedicated to together. For the grace of God in which we share. Because like underground streams, this is what nourishes everything else we are and do. This is God working among us. This is where we discover the joy that transforms tasks and pledges and the like into *ministry* in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Resources:

Dwelling with Philippians: a conversation with scripture through image and word, ed. Elizabeth Steele Halstead, Paul Detterman, Joyce Berger, and John D. Witvliet

Philippians (Interpretation Commentary), Fred Craddock.