

## **"TOGETHER IN SPIRIT... WHATEVER THE FUTURE HOLDS"**

Philippians 4:4-9

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It comes up all the time in conversation these days: how much life has changed this year. It feels like almost everything is different. Our interactions with others, our movements, our sense of what "safety" means. What we worry about and what we get excited about. What work or school looks like. How we do ordinary things, like shopping and cleaning... even getting dressed: who knew you could be choosing a mask to go with your outfit?

And this year sure has changed how we do church: from Sunday morning worship to the stewardship campaign, from pastoral care to Session meetings, it's all changed a lot.

We're not alone. Churches all over the country (and, I guess, all over the world) have had to figure out how to be the church in new ways. Priorities have been rearranged, time and energy are being spent differently, some stuff that felt urgent before doesn't seem important now.

All this change is really anxiety-producing.

I'm starting to realize that an undercurrent of all this anxiety is the worry that some of the changes we are experiencing might not be temporary. It's hard to come to grips with these fears that some things may never be the same again.

We wonder if we'll ever feel really comfortable in a crowded room again. If sports and performing arts will recover. If we're always going to feel anxious about travelling. We've seen the permanent closures of beloved local businesses and wonder if more are coming. We hear concerns that colleges, especially smaller ones, are struggling.

We have similar questions about church. What if some people like worshipping at home in their pajama so much they want to keep doing that? What if there are folks who get to feeling so disconnected during this time that they never reconnect? What might the long-term financial implications be? Will we ever be able to have potlucks again? Will this change how we use our building? How is worship going to be different after this?

Reformation Sunday is a day for remembering that change is – it always has been – a fact of life for the church.

Because this is a day that's about history, maybe we should let history give us a little perspective: There was a time when most Christian worship services were in Latin. Christians killed other Christians over theological differences almost nobody even understands today. At one time in our Reformed tradition no musical instruments were

used in worship, and at another time we had a thing in the communion service actually called “fencing the table” – warning anybody with sin on their conscience that they’d better not partake. Forced conversions not just to Christianity but to European culture were accepted missionary practice. For a long, long time very few church leadership roles were open to women. Not so long ago, Protestants and Catholics didn’t recognize each other as Christian. Many of us can remember when you wouldn’t think of going to church without getting dressed up, and when forty-five minute sermons were standard.

In its more than 2000-year history and in its myriad diverse cultural expressions, the church has faced all kinds of challenges and been surrounded by constant societal change... and has kept the faith by adapting and finding new ways to live the gospel.

We Presbyterians love to say that we are “Reformed and Always Reforming.” Especially on Reformation Sunday! This year, that much-loved motto seems to carry extra significance, but it also feels particularly challenging. I mean, we like the idea in theory, but we’re used to change happening .... more gradually. This year, the ‘re-forming’ (or re-grouping) we’ve had to do has not only felt like a lot of change, it’s change that was more or less thrust upon us, and we’re not too happy about it.

Presbyterian writer Phyllis Tickle once observed that every 500 years (give or take) the church experiences “a massive upheaval” - old ideas are left behind, as new ways emerge. It’s a little bit like a rummage sale, which prompts you to clean house, decide what to keep, and what you no longer have a use for- what needs to go to make room for something new. The Protestant Reformation was certainly that kind of event, and it was ... 500 years ago. Before her death a couple of years ago, Tickle suggested that the church might be due for another such “tectonic shift,” that would bring big changes both in our understanding of our faith and how we practice it.

Are the changes we’re experiencing in this pandemic year signs of the shift she describes? I don’t know. It might be too soon to say what ways of being church we will ultimately let go of and what new learnings from our “pandemic practices” are here to stay.

Will there continue to be “online only” congregations, and what will that mean for “in person worship?” Will worship in the sanctuary be different when we do gather? Will we have to think differently about what “attendance” and “membership” mean? Is technology going to play an ever-bigger role in church life? Will our expectations for pastors and other church leaders change?

We don’t know the answers to those questions, or to a host of other questions we have about the future... and a lot of us are finding it all stressful.

Reading Paul’s words to the Philippians (you knew I’d get around to it eventually, right?) in our current context seems at first completely inappropriate. “Rejoice always.” Always? Now? That’s a really tall order these days. And “Don’t worry about anything?” Really? That’s easier said than done, and maybe not even very realistic. You could be forgiven for

thinking that these verses have little to say to people who have as much reason to worry about the future as we have.

I think we often hear much of what Paul says in this part of his letter as a series of “timeless platitudes” (Eddy, p 163) that *sound* very spiritual and would probably make a nice inspirational plaque for the wall, but don’t seem grounded in the lived realities of our time, or really any time. But we shouldn’t read what Paul writes here without remembering that he is writing from prison. He is isolated. He’s longing to be with this “beloved community” in Philippi that means so much to him. At the same time, the church in Philippi is struggling as well. They are suffering, and unsurprisingly (as often happens in churches like it does in families during times of stress!) there are tensions within the community.

This all might lead them to question whether their community has a future, to feel hopeless, to worry. But Paul doesn’t want them to get stuck in that. For him, the challenges are simply all the more reason to persist, stay focused on what matters, keep the faith that Paul has been nurturing among them.

He wants them to understand that if they keep the faith, they can not only face the future, they can do so with joy and without being burdened by anxiety and fear. I suspect that the first time the members of that church in Philippi heard this letter read out loud, they might have been skeptical about that “rejoicing” and “not worrying” stuff, too. At least until they had time to reflect on the rest of what Paul says, and to understand the path he’s trying to point them toward. Everybody knows joy can’t be bought or planned for; everybody knows you can’t just turn worry off. Paul’s recommendation, though, is this: Know that the Lord is near. Pray. Let your troubled heart and mind rest in God’s presence.

Prayer here is not a technique, not a set of words or requests, but a *relationship*. The “anythings” and “everythings” of our lives can be – often are – sources of endless worry... or they can be the stuff of prayer.

“Not worrying” is not a passive acceptance of “the way things are.” It is disciplined thought, action, and especially prayer. Keep your mind focused on things like integrity, justice, holiness ...instead of worry. Keep doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen from people of faith before you. Not necessarily *the exact same things* in the *exact same way*... but persist as they did, learn from them to face challenges as opportunities, keep growing, remain committed to the community, care for one another, show the love of God to neighbors, be faithful in the little things, don’t let anything distract you from following Jesus.

In this way of life, Paul believes that the church not only can survive but thrive. And the by-product is *joy*. Joy as Paul describes it is counter-cultural; it has little to do with “success” as the world defines it. It’s not individual fun and happiness, but a shared

experience. "Rejoice *together*," Paul writes. That's an important difference, and it makes *all* the difference.

Joy is "an outcome and a sign of the presence of the risen Christ – like the flag that flies over Buckingham Palace when the queen is in residence." (Eddy, p.161) It says to the world, "God's presence is here."

And that is all we need to know, really, about the future. Even though what the future will bring is unknown and not in our control, even if our current state of uncertainty and change is making us fearful. The future is not in our hands but that is not a reason to despair or worry. God will be in our midst, whatever the future brings. Our job is faithfulness in the present... undergirded by a lot of prayer that asks and trusts God to hold our fears. And, if Paul is right, together we will discover some joy along the way.

Over the past months, churches have done many amazing things, and learned a lot in the process. If you'd told me a year ago we'd be able to live-stream worship every week, I'd have laughed. (And I wouldn't have wanted to do it!) But we learned that we can adapt, AND we also learned that even unwanted changes can bring new opportunities. (Let me just pause here to say hello to Don & Marge in Florida, and to other members who are out-or-town but still joining us this morning. And also to to Bill in Kentucky, Diana Rosa in Georgia, Cindy in Pittsburgh, Eileen in Harborcreek, Pennsylvania.)

When you can't be together to pass the peace, pray, or share a meal, how does a congregation stay connected? When you can't invite people to come to Sunday worship and coffee hour, how do you reach out and interact with your neighbors? When you can't go together to volunteer at places like Ministry with Community, what does a church committed to mission do? When people can't get together in person, how do we learn together or plan for the future?

Congregations have responded to these new challenges in all sorts of creative ways: drive-through fellowship, driveway visits, live-streamed story-time for kids, new outdoor worship spaces, learning to use zoom, places for passers-by to leave prayer requests, redoubled efforts in phone calling and hand-written notes, quiet & reflective services that don't include singing, gestures of support for healthcare workers and teachers, mission collections, virtual retreats, drop-off care packages. We've come up with a lot of new ideas; and what's more significant, we've learned that we *can* be resourceful, try new things, break out of our ruts, be surprised.

And of course, we have been dealing with more than a pandemic these past several months.

Deep inequities and divisions in our society have been exposed in ways that make it impossible for us to deny these realities. The spread of hate speech and the upending of other norms have disturbed us. We've become much more aware of how pervasive racism is, even within the church, and we are among many majority-white congregations in which

members are dedicating themselves to listening and reading, learning, protesting, strengthening community connections, and working for change.

As all of this has been happening, many churches are coming to the realization that keeping quiet to “avoid conflict” no longer feels faithful, and are finding their voices to speak out from a perspective of faith.

We can’t unlearn what we have learned – nor should we want to. We have had to ask ourselves questions about priorities, about who we are, about the nature of Christian community, about the church’s role in the world, about what God might be calling us to.

One pastor put it this way: “This pandemic has allowed us to hold a mirror up to ourselves to see what kind of church we are – what is it that we do best and what is it we can let go of.”

We don’t have answers to all our questions yet. We probably won’t know until we have more perspective on it just how much this pandemic period will change the trajectory of the future. Perhaps it really will mean a “tectonic shift” for the church. Perhaps it’s part of a larger, ongoing process of reforming and reshaping the church for a different future.

Paul would say to us, “Keep the faith. Don’t worry about anything. Trust God. Rejoice always.”

With his message in mind, I invite you to join responsively in reading from Psalm 96, (verses 1-6) which is an affirmation of that joyful confidence in God’s presence and faithfulness:

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

**Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

**For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.**

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

**Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.**

Resources:

“The Reformation Rummage Sale” by Donna Frischknecht Jackson in *Presbyterians Today*, September/October 2020.

Essays on Philippians 4:4-9 by Jill Y Crainshaw and Nathan Eddy in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 4

*Philippians* (Interpretation Commentary) by Fred Craddock