

Joy Can Sometimes Be Hard to Find
Series: "Finding Joy" - Philippians 1
Wednesday, April 10, 2024
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This April we're taking a closer look at Paul's letter to the Philippians. We're calling our sermon series *Finding Joy*. Paul's gratitude and joy spills out all through the letter.

No newsflash here but *joy can sometimes be hard to find*. Mental health issues are taking a heavy toll on our schools and families. The Israel-Hamas war is making things worse and worse in Gaza. And in our own backyard, ever since the outbreak of Covid, and even before, churches have been struggling with worship attendance and declining Sunday School enrollment and finding enough volunteers to carry out the ministry. No doubt, we could come up with a long list of situations in which joy can be incredibly hard to find.

The Apostle Paul is in one of those situations. He's the founding pastor of a small house church in Philippi. He's writing a letter that will be read aloud in worship. He's writing it from a jail cell. We're not exactly sure why he's there, but Paul had been in jail before, and in Philippi, no less. In Acts 16 Paul cast out a fortune-telling spirit from a slave girl. No more fortune telling for her, and no more money to be made. Her owners were furious; 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, his 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.

"I want you to know," Paul assures the Philippians, "that my imprisonment is leading to some good things. In fact, it hasn't squelched the message that I'm preaching at all, but rather has spread it. Paul goes on, "I'm not in prison because of bad behavior, but rather because of my commitment to Christ." We're not exactly sure what Paul means by this, but he wants the Philippians to know, loud and clear, that he is a prisoner for Christ.

Notice that Paul isn't simply making excuses. Rather, he fearlessly claims that it's not so much *he* who's in trouble, but the gospel itself. Much like in Jesus' day, it's so easy for doubters to claim: "If this holy man were truly of God, this wouldn't be happening to him." Both then and now, we often blame the victim.

Paul can't stop the doubters, of course, but he can look for joy in the middle of his troubles. That's important because his Philippian followers are bound to be having doubts of their own: "If this happened to Paul, our founding pastor, what's going to happen to 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 this 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? Sure they would. Undoubtedly, some claims made by preachers today are downright silly. When Covid was beginning, televangelist Kenneth Copeland, told his viewers: "You don't need to go the doctor. I can heal you right through your TVs...and, oh yeah, be sure to send in your offerings when I do."

Other claims of rivals can be much more serious. A pastor from Wisconsin was serving a couple of small rural churches. One of the congregations had been overrun with members of the LCMC (Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ). This 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. Sadly, before the dust had settled, the pastor felt a need to resign. And as Good Shepherd well knows, the resignation of a pastor can be very hard on a congregation.

When Paul hears about the rival preachers, he doesn't counterattack. He seems less concerned with the message of his rivals than with their motives. "They might be in it for themselves," Paul suggests, "but every time they open their mouths, at least Christ is proclaimed. And that gives me joy!"

Joy can sometimes be hard to find. Yet Paul continues to look for it. He writes with gratitude: "Through your faithful prayers and the generous help of Jesus, this will turn out for my deliverance. I'm convinced," Paul claims, "that everything God wants to do in and through me will get done!"

That's a bold statement for a guy sitting in prison cell! You may not know this, but Roman prisons were not geared toward punishment. They were geared

toward a trial. And that trial usually resulted in one of two things: either the prisoner got released or was executed. Clearly, there was a lot on the line. “I will continue to speak with all boldness,” says Paul, “whether by life or by death.”

All of a sudden there’s uncertainty in the air. Keep in mind, Paul is writing to new Christians in Philippi. 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. “Keep trusting that Christ will watch out for you, come what may!”

As Paul languishes in a Roman prison cell, he writes: “To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I live, I’ve got work still to do. And if I die, I’ll go to be with Christ.” Is Paul vacillating? Maybe a little. He seems determined to get back to Philippi. He feels close to them. But now he’s not sure if he’s going to make it. Paul does what he can to reassure them: “Whether I live or die, everything is going to be OK!”

Joy can sometimes be hard to find. Over the last few years I’ve followed the story of Simone Biles, the Olympic gymnast. Early in the competition of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Simone looked troubled. Then she was pulling out of events. And finally she opened up about her mental health. Her mind and body weren’t working together. She had something called “the twisties” that were keeping her from rotating her body effectively. But Simone was a loyal teammate. Even as she was dropping out of events she watched and cheered her teammates from the sidelines.

On the final day of competition, Simone ended up winning a bronze medal in the balance beam. Everyone stood up and cheered. We got a lump in our throats. After Simone had won her medal, a commentator shared a thought from sportscaster Johnny Miller: “People shouldn’t be judged only on what they accomplish. They should also be judged on what they overcome.”

Friends, whether we’re talking about Simone Biles or the Apostle Paul, joy can sometimes be hard to find. What we overcome along the way can make all the difference in the world. As followers of Jesus, may we freely share whatever joy we can with those who need it just as much as we do. Amen.