

The Deep-Down Joy of Imitating Christ

Series: “Finding Joy” – Philippians 2

Sunday, April 14, 2024

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Towards the end of Philippians chapter 1, Paul tells the little house church in Philippi that he hopes to come and see them soon. That would mean Paul getting released from a Roman prison. As Paul’s letter is read aloud during worship, you can almost hear those in attendance bursting into applause. As Paul says it, though, he backtracks a bit: “Whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I want you to stand side by side in the faith. That’s important to me!” Again, we’re not exactly sure why Paul is in prison, or what’s going on in Philippi—either in the city or in the church—but Paul is hinting of troubles that are brewing for the early followers of Jesus.

Sound familiar? Know any churches that are *not* standing side by side these days? Sure you do. Over the years, I’ve encountered church troubles for everything from a building project, to a painting of a very Norwegian-looking Jesus, to the ELCA churchwide vote in 2009 allowing same-gender weddings. Mind you, I wasn’t the direct cause of any of these actions, but as a part of the church, I had to try my best to deal with these divisive issues.

Paul was also trying to deal with some divisive issues. Philippians is Paul’s attempt to provide a lifeline. Since it’s a letter, and we’re only getting one side of the story, we have to read between the lines. The first part of today’s passage points to trouble in the city of Philippi itself. Maybe it’s with city officials; maybe it’s with a pagan temple down the street; maybe it’s with next-door neighbors who think this Jesus business is downright silly. Whatever it is, the Christians in Philippi are suddenly feeling like they have *opponents*. “Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” In so many words, Paul exhorts them: “You don’t have to apologize for following Jesus, but don’t be a jerk about it either. People are watching. What you say and do is a witness to them.”

Want an example of what this could look like? Consider what happened to Isaiah Jewett in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Maybe you remember it. Jewett was running the men’s 800-meter race. He’d made it to the semifinals. Previously, he’d won an NCAA championship, so his prospects were good. Jewett was on the backstretch, heading into the homestretch, and like the other runners was jockeying for position. He was ready to start his final kick.

And then someone clipped the back of his heel, and his right leg smacked into his left. He stumbled and fell onto the track. In the process, a runner from Botswana—Nijel Amos—tripped over Jewett and crumpled up beside him.

Jewett scrapped himself off the track and took a step toward Amos. *Un oh. Now what?* Surprisingly, Jewett didn't point a finger of blame or shake a fist in anger. He didn't appear angry at all. Rather, he extended his hand toward the Botswanan. "Come on, man," said Jewett, and he pulled him up to his feet.

"I'm sorry," said Amos, "I'm so very sorry." Jewett responded, "Let's just finish the race." So, they put their arms around each other. They trotted down the track side by side, blood trickling down Jewett's leg. They crossed the finish line about a minute behind the leaders.

I don't know if Isaiah Jewett is a Christian, but this was certainly a Christ-like action. It was humble and gracious and profoundly moving to all who were watching. In a similar vein, Paul is telling the Philippians—and us: "When you bump into *opponents*, don't roll your eyes or shake your fist in anger; instead, extend them a hand. Do what you can to walk side by side. The world may come to see that you are a follower of Christ."

The Philippians are facing troubles within their church as well. Again, we're not sure what the issues are, but we'll hear more about them in chapter 4. It's no big surprise, though. Churches are made up of people. We can squabble over just about anything.

Just a reminder that Paul had founded the congregation in Philippi a few years before. Now, from his prison cell, he pours out his heart to them: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any compassion and sympathy, please do me a favor: Be of the same mind! Have the same love! Don't insist on getting your way!"

Friends, let's be honest, we've experienced troubles of our own here at Good Shepherd—particularly with the resignation of Pastor Sarah late last fall, and a couple years before that, with the resignation of Pastor Mary. Those were undoubtedly painful and discouraging moments. In the midst of conflict, Paul urges us, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

That's an incredibly hard thing to do! Clearly, being part of a church is not for the faint of heart. Let me tell you a story of just how different churches can be in trying to deal with divisive issues. When I was serving at Zumbro in Rochester, I got a call one morning from a man named Wayne. His voice was weak and raspy. I could barely make out what he was saying. Wayne told me he was on his way back to Florida. He was wondering if we were an *elca* church, by which I figured he meant an ELCA church. It was his way of hoping that we were accepting of gay people. I told him, "Yes, we are an *elca* church, and yes, we are accepting of those who happen to be gay."

Wayne continued. He asked if we could pay for an additional night's lodging at his hotel. Truth be told, with the Mayo Clinic nearby, we often got calls asking for help. We were ready to help—we had a Good Samaritan fund—but before we used it, we at least tried to check out the details.

Wayne's story was complicated. He shared that he had HIV/AIDS and likely didn't have long to live. In the last two weeks he'd been to Port Angeles, Washington, attempting to reunite with his parents. Sad to say, the visit did not go well. Wayne was coming through Rochester on his way back to Florida to continue his treatment.

We ended up paying for another night at the hotel. Later I called Wayne and asked if I could come by and pray with him. We met in the hotel lobby. He was frail. He looked like he weighed about 120 pounds. Despite limited energy, he seemed eager to talk.

He told me his parents had connected with Westboro Baptist Church, a judgmental, homophobic congregation. His parents had become harshly critical of him. They spouted things like: "God hates fags! You're no longer our son!"

Wayne was deeply wounded. He didn't understand how Christians could be so judgmental, so cruel. I asked about his connection with an *elca* church. He said that his former partner got him going to an ELCA congregation in Florida – Redeemer Lutheran. The pastor's wife had a son who was gay. He said people seemed accepting of him there. And then he added with a lump in his throat: "My partner had AIDS too—and he died from it—but I've kept going to that church. I've heard more about the love and acceptance of Jesus from my church family than I've ever heard from my own. They're the only family I've got

left.” Wayne finished his story. We prayed for his trip back to Florida, and we gave thanks for the good people waiting for him at Redeemer Lutheran Church.

Friends, I’m not suggesting that the issues we face in today’s world are easy. Not for a minute. And Paul doesn’t spell out in detail how we’re supposed to treat each other in every instance. There’s no long list of rights and wrongs; *Do this and don’t do that!* Paul does share a hymn, though. It’s meant to inspire his readers. To me the hymn sounds a lot more like Redeemer Lutheran than Westboro Baptist.

Listen to it from the Message version: “Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, becoming human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ. And they will call out in praise that he is the Lord of all.”

Friends, why would Paul include a hymn like this in his letter? Not to scold us. Not to spell out in every way how we’re supposed to act toward each other. But rather to urge us to stand side by side, to give us a sense of a deep-down joy that can come from imitating Christ. The Philippians were living in a culture and a church that was marred by self-serving behavior. As Paul saw it, they needed a reminder of the person that had given them life in the first place.

The hymn in Philippians is often referred to as “the Christ hymn.” It makes me think of a hymn we’ll be singing in just a moment: “Will be you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace, to let you be my servant too.”

Friends, whether you are holding out your hand to a person who’s fallen or making room in your life for someone who’s deeply discouraged, you are called to be Christ-like in your words and deeds. As you do these things, strive to stand side by side with your brothers and sisters here at Good Shepherd, and pray that you may find some deep-down joy in imitating Christ. Amen.