



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Gentleness and Joy

Philippians 4.4–7

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Everyone has traditions at the holidays. When our kids were little, it was leaving a plate of very lovingly made holly berry cookies and a glass of milk by the fireplace for Santa—with a carrot for Rudolph of course. On Christmas Eve evening, we know some folks who visit the local retirement facility to enjoy lively carol singing with the residents. Or maybe, like friends of ours, it's a tradition to get up Christmas morning and first thing... enjoy a mug of coffee and a warm cinnamon roll. And not those out-of-the-can rolls—it's the real deal—a special bakery cinnamon roll. There's something celestial about the way the cream cheese frosting melts down into the sugary, cinnamon-y crevices to produce a perfect blend of spice, tang and sweet, bringing a Christmas *hallelujah* to the taste buds.

Now according to our friends, there's no wrong way to eat a cinnamon roll, but I propose that there is a right way to eat one. A cinnamon roll is just made to be unwound. It's not a cinnamon doughnut or a cinnamon cake—it's a roll, and it begs to be unrolled. Starting at the outside and slowly, lovingly work toward the inner sanctum, there's that luscious holy-of-holies that is the center of the cinnamon roll. Without a doubt—no one can dispute—the best bite of a cinnamon roll is that crowning center bite.ⁱ

(I hope you are sufficiently salivating by now—I am!) What, you might ask, does any of this have to do with four verses in the book of Philippians 4? Au contraire—I would propose that this short passage, penned by the apostle Paul, has given us the center bite of the Philippian cinnamon roll!

Hear again these delicious words of encouragement:

PHILIPPIANS 4.4–7 NRSV

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

ⁱ*Philippians 4.4–7 Commentary* by Jacob Myers, www.workingpreacher.org

2 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In this short passage, Paul sets before his beloved church at Philippi two great qualities in life. The first is **JOY!** “Rejoice,” says Paul, and I will say it again, Rejoice!” It’s as if he said “Rejoice” once and then in his mind’s eye he could picture what the future most likely held for them. Paul himself was lying in a Roman prison cell with almost certain death awaiting him because of his faith. And the people at Philippi were setting out on a new path as followers of Jesus—dark days and dangers and persecution inevitably lay ahead for them. And this fledgling church was not only troubled by external threats and a hostile environment, but there was great internal strife. Two prominent church leaders, Euodia (you-oh-dee-a) and Syntyche (soon-too-kay), were quarreling and causing great division from within. Paul urged the church not to be victimized by its problems from within or without, but to Rejoice in spite of them.

It’s as if Paul were saying, “I’ve thought of everything that could possibly happen down the road. And I’m gonna stick with it—Rejoice! And again I say...rejoice!” The use of the present imperative twice, signals that for Paul, “rejoicing” was a habitual attitude that could actually inform behavior—kind of like flexing those joy muscles.

The joy Paul has in mind here is not superficial, like the canned laughter that we hear from invisible TV sitcom audiences. There is a difference between finding something funny or even being happy—and JOY—which is something much deeper, down inside. This joy is not a fleeting mood...it has a lasting effect and the power to change us. The word in the original language for rejoice or joy is *chairo* (high-row), which can also be translated “to be well...to thrive.” This joy doesn’t deny the painful realities of life, but instead it affords well-being

and even thriving in the midst of them. This is the real and lasting joy that comes from the confidence that no matter what happens, we are inseparably connected to God. For the brothers and sisters at Philippi, this was the Joy to which Paul called them. It was rooted in that exponential love of God that we've been exploring this Advent. This joy is independent of all earthly things. Its source is in the promise of the continual presence of God—Immanuel. This joy is anchored, not in bright circumstances but in a deep commitment to God and God's ways. This is a joy that can withstand even the darkest travails of life.

We can't separate, however, this instruction to rejoice from the sentence that follows in this letter—*Let your gentleness be known to everyone*. This second sentence of the passage is integral to the first. The word translated here as *gentleness* doesn't cut it completely. The word in Greek—*epiekeia* (ep-ee-a-kace)—is thought perhaps to be the most untranslatable of all Greek words and varies from version to version. Here we have the NRSV as *gentleness*. Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases it this way: *Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them*. The Greeks explained it as "justice and something better than justice." It suggests that we are in this life together and unity in the church matters. And the ways that we treat one another matter.

For some, life is a struggle, especially this time of year. The holidays can be very difficult when life is supposed to be full of joy. But it is not. It is then that gentleness can be a healing balm as we care for one another in difficult times. Deacons and pastors and friends are ready with a listening ear and more help as needed. And there are "Blue Christmas" services held in our communities to acknowledge pain and help in healing.

For Paul, joy is cultivated through mutual support, "I've got your back" ...and is rooted deeply in relationships, built on trust and God's love, that exponential love that grows and grows beyond our imagination. Joy is about seeing the

4 connections that we have to others and accepting that these connections can bring shared sorrow, but that bearing it together is part of the meaning of life, part of the joy. We catch a glimpse of something stronger, deeper and more powerful. Maybe it's the world as it could and should be—a world of new possibilities rooted in the power of God's love.

It gives us much to consider, as one scholar suggests that these two tenets—joy and gentleness—form a parenthesis around the church....in Philippi and here and everywhere.

I think that we witnessed the overwhelming power of JOY, real joy, when we were in Nigeria. About mid-way through my Sabbath Rest nearly two years ago, I was invited to preach on a Sunday morning at the EYN Mubi—Church #2 in the northeast, not far from the EYN church headquarters. Mubi 2 had been torched in the Insurgency in 2014—totally burned to the ground. While a new building was being constructed, the 800 or so worshipers of all ages gathered in a make-shift building—a corrugated tin roof, supported by raw timbers. Not only had the people lost their church building, many lost their homes and almost all had family and friends who had died cruelly at the hands of the Boko Haram. Many families were splintered as some fled to displaced camps in hopes of finding shelter and food. The loss was staggering. And yet, the worship that morning was lively and engaging as several different choirs sang and danced, drummers beat to the music, student groups received awards for graduation, abundant prayers were offered for thanksgiving and petition, and several offerings were lifted.

It was more than an hour until I was invited to the plexiglass podium to preach, with the help of an interpreter. The scripture for the morning was from Luke 1—*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.* Certainly these dear people had experienced the shadow of death. I wondered what might be a word of both hope and encouragement.... And then I

remembered...that someone had told us before we left home, that we should be sure to look up at the night sky in northeast Nigeria. In the central and southern parts of Nigeria, the Harmattan, trade winds from the Sahara, create an over cast sky much of the time. But the Northeast is different. Without the winds and the lights of big cities, the night sky is amazing. And so, with the help of that interpreter, I shared that we had hoped to see the night sky when we visited Nigeria. And we did, and we weren't disappointed. The very evening before, in our backyard in Swarhi, we looked up, and we could almost see the dome of the heavens. It was stunning. And I couldn't help but share... "The stars over Nigeria shine more brightly than any place on earth." The joy that erupted in that make-shift sanctuary was both palpable and audible. Our Nigerian sisters and brothers knew the tender mercy of God and gave witness to the light, even the night lights, that pierce the darkness. They knew the joy of new possibilities rooted in the power of God's love. We will never forget that day and the Joy that we experienced.

Frank Harrington, renown Presbyterian pastor and seminary professor, tells of an encounter with an infectiously joyful boy on an elevator. "I mean," he said, "this boy was whistling up a storm!" "Son," Harrington said, "you seem to be having a mighty good day!" "Oh, yes sir," the boy replied. "You see, I've never lived this day before!"

I think that children "get" joy—they know innately what it means to Rejoice! A survey was done recently, interviewing terminally ill kids, asking them what gives them joy most in all of life...what really matters. Here's what they said...

- Be kind.
- Read more books.
- Spend time with family.
- Crack jokes!
- Go to the beach.
- Hug your dog...or cat.

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- Tell that special person that you love them.
- The rest is details.

Oh, and they said, eat ice cream. Or...a cinnamon roll, unwinding all the way to the soft center!

I invite you, as we come to the time in this service that we offer our joy, our time, our energy, our gifts, our love to God and neighbor, to hear these words of Paul, found immediately after our passage for this morning. They are kind of like the aftertaste of that cinnamon roll...you just want them to linger.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

May these words, and the images on the screen help us to flex our JOY muscles.

