

Matthew 22:1-14
Philippians 4:1-9 (4-7)

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
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Joy in Obedience

Throughout Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Paul offers himself as an example to be imitated. His attitude toward his own imprisonment, his rejection of past values in favor of being overtaken by the gospel of Jesus Christ, his single-minded focus on the citizenship of heaven are all parts of Paul's life which he offers for their instructional value. He sees in the story of Jesus Christ an example of obedience which guides us as Christians in our own obedience.

One of Paul's themes in this passage is joy. Verse 4 encourages, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Paul urges his same joy on the Philippians. This is surely one of the most important, and one of the most neglected, aspects of this letter and of Paul's understanding of the Christian life. Even as his own well-being is threatened, even as he contemplates the possibility of not seeing the Christians at Philippi again, he is able to voice joy over them and urge joy on them.

Some modern-day Christians may think this is an unexpected element in Paul's letter. Some people tend to associate faith itself with a seriousness which suggests joy as being trivial or lacking in dignity. Others suggest Paul's words are confirmation of the attitude that the church exists in order to make people feel good. Paul would find himself uncomfortable with either group. For Paul, joy comes as an entirely appropriate response to the good news of God's action in and through Jesus Christ. Joy, then, is a by-

product or a result of the gospel, not to be confused with the good news itself.

Two times in this letter Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to “rejoice in the Lord.” The second time he repeats the call, “Rejoice...again I will say rejoice!” and adds the word “always.” The joy of the Christian is not a short-lived quality. Rejoicing is not to be reserved for special times of worship or praise. Rejoicing is to be continuous, uninterrupted and unbroken!

For Paul to repeat himself may indicate the conditions in Philippi are such as to make his call to rejoice unreasonable. So, he is saying, in spite of the circumstances, in spite of annoyance, disagreement, or persecution, rejoice! This is the theme of Paul’s life, to rejoice!

Christ our Lord was crucified on the Cross to save us from sin and is risen from the dead. The power of His Resurrection is available to each of us. To rejoice is to rest on the redemption won for us by Christ and to live in the freedom His redemption provides.

Paul urges the Philippians to rejoice because he does so himself. What Paul refers to is not a superficial cheerfulness but a deep joy in what he has done in Christ and continues to do through the saints. The fact that this joy is “in the Lord” reminds us not only that it comes from the Lord, but also that it is shared by those who live in Christ. Paul is not thinking of something which is only an emotional experience or which is in any sense fleeting. He is thinking of a deep and lasting joy which comes through a deepening

relationship with Christ. This joy is expressed in sharing his love and concern for others. If many Christians today lack such joy, perhaps they see their faith as an individual matter. They may not see Christian life in terms of mutual respect and concern for others or do not experience the love and support of fellow Christians. We may ask ourselves if we are able to experience the joy of the gospel without living it.

In verses 4-5, Paul addresses briefly the church's dealings with those outside the church. He advises everyone to show consideration to others, not simply to fellow Christians. Since this attitude is also a reflection of that which is seen in Christ, Paul is urging the Philippians to let their lives be a proclamation of the gospel.

In verse 5, the Greek word (επιεικεις) for "gentleness" is one of the most untranslatable Greek words, according to William Barclay, a Bible scholar. When comparing various translations, the meanings can be moderation, patience, softness, patient of mind, modesty, forbearance, and magnanimity. It could be an interesting experience to reflect on these meanings and question ourselves as to whether and how these words describe us. Maxie Dunnam in *The Preacher's Commentary* says he comes to patient of mind and is condemned. He continues by asking himself "How often do I appear gentle, try to be gentle and understanding; but my mind is in high gear – questioning, judging, filled with unkind thoughts, even condemning." Magnanimity is a big word for a big heart, a heart which is open enough, soft and tender enough, understanding enough to accept someone as the other person is, to receive another person into a relationship unconditionally, without pre-judging.

Our translation in the NRSV uses the word “gentleness.” It is a lost word, it seems, in describing Christians. Our way of relating is shaped by the brusque world in which we live – a world of assertiveness and bluntness. Mr. Dunnam also asks, “What yeast in the leaven might we become if we cultivate gentleness.” Gentleness is not a soft virtue, but rather a kind of character which controls our capacity for rage and activates our capacity to love. Gentle people are courteous and kind; exercise restraint; and practice reticence in speech, knowing that words can wound, and silence may be more affirming than chatter. They do not intrude into someone else’s life but are available and responsive to the needs of others. It is no wonder Paul names gentleness as a fruit of the Spirit.

In verse 6, “Be anxious for nothing,” Paul admonishes that anxiety is our most common problem. Anxiety prevents us from experiencing joy. Worry, confusion of mind, pressures of daily life, uncertainty about the future – if we begin to catalog specific areas within these general categories, we would soon run out of space. Depression is possibly the most common emotional problem in America today, and one of the most difficult with which to deal. Often the severity of depression requires hospitalization and medication; but those who are hospitalized, even those who are under the care of a doctor for this illness, represent only a small portion of our population who are functioning far below the level of effectiveness as persons. They are weighed down so oppressively by anxiety that they cannot even dream of taking themselves lightly so that like angels they can fly.

Anxiety, in the way Paul uses the word, and the way we most often experience it, is the futile, frustrating, debilitating attempt to bear the burdens of life and especially of the future, by ourselves, alone. The Christian answer to anxiety is confident prayer which ushers in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

Anxiety is not a deep word, not a religious expression, not an easy discussion about complex issues. Remember Paul is in prison. At every step of his Christian journey, anxiety is always pursuing him. Fears, uncertainty about the future, persecution, physical disease, mental anguish – the list becomes a catalog for Paul and possibly for us. Paul's writing comes from the sweaty arena of life where his words beg to be heard, and from a person who has experienced the answer he is offering.

Paul's offer of prayer is not an easy solution. There is no magic here, no bed-time or morning rote repetition of words we label as prayer. Paul is talking about the serious business of bringing our lives before God, examining our dependence on God, and placing our lives in God's hands to be used, remembering and celebrating what God has already done. Paul is talking about confessing our needs, dedicating our gifts, committing ourselves and all that we are to make our common cause God's kingdom, not our own kingdom. When prayer is understood in that way, then it is not easy to say that anxiety is an attempt to carry the burden of the present and the future alone; prayer is yielding the anxiety and burden to God and leaving it in the safe hands of God.

Prayer, supplication, and requests are not to be separated; they are synonyms. Thanksgiving is prayer also, and gratitude, gratitude for the past benefits of God which cultivates confidence in future benefits.

It is obvious that Paul is familiar with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus says we should become like children to possess the kingdom. The childlike capacity to trust, to trust God for the present and the future, is characteristic of Christians. We encourage the capacity to trust through our life of prayer. As our capacity to trust expands, our tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity grows; and our anxiety diminishes.

Few of us find it easy to not worry. We tend to worry about everything! Our attitude is the opposite of the trust in God which Paul suggests. It is sobering to remember Paul is in prison, facing a capital charge, when he writes this letter. And that is not his only problem, for his responsibility for the churches was a constant concern. The people to whom he is writing are unlikely to be living comfortable lives. Most of them are poor, many are slaves, and few of them would know the meaning of security. In contrast, many of us today are frequently worried and anxious no matter what our financial status may be. The secret of Paul's composure is he is relying on God, and not on material goods. This freedom from worry and anxiety does not, of course, imply an irresponsible attitude toward life and one's obligations. It is a mark of Christian maturity to be able to distinguish between the anxiety which cripples and destroys the individual and the concern for others which builds up the entire community.

Paul directs the Philippians to pray with joy and thanksgiving. Paul's prayers are filled with thanksgiving. Paul is writing from prison to people who have very little in material things. All too often our own prayers are nothing but a shopping list, without joy or thanksgiving. Our anxiety about the future hides the benefits which God showers on us. Gratitude to God for all we have been given will allow the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds, protecting us against all which might destroy us.

Paul suggests we hand over our anxieties to God through prayer. Once we have accomplished this, and we will find this to be an ongoing process, we will be better able to serve and obey our Lord which, in turn, will bring joy into our lives. As we experience more joy, we will be more comfortable in praying for ourselves and others, and giving our anxieties to God. What we are doing is taking the negative forces of our lives and turning them into positive Christ-like attitudes. These positive attitudes will encourage us in our every-day lives, in reaching out to others to share the joy of the gospel message, and in obeying and serving our Lord Jesus Christ. May we begin, in small steps, to follow Paul's advice and work toward experiencing more joy in our lives through obeying Jesus Christ and sharing our joy with those around us. Amen!