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Anchoring Scriptures - Philippians 4:1-9
January 26, 2020

Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 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. 9 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.

Sermon

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

Three years ago, in January of 2017, while perusing the internet, I clicked on an article called, “How to Stay Outraged Without Losing Your Mind,” by Mirah Curzer.¹ Much like our scripture from Paul’s letter to the Philippians today, this article looked *nice*, maybe even a bit fluffy. It seemed to be something you read at first and think, “oh that’s nice,” without really feeling like you’ve engaged in anything of significance. Similar to Paul’s words, “stand firm, beloved, rejoice in God always,” I thought this article would be pretty non-substantive. Less like an article in *The Atlantic*, and more like an article on Buzz Feed that would be situated right next to another article on celebrity gossip. I’m not even sure why I clicked on it. I wasn’t expecting much.

But over these years, I have watched things I care about—children, equal rights, refugees and immigrants, anti-racism, sustainable environmental practices, clean water—be threatened by governmental policy issues. And I have called my elected officials, protested, donated—and sometimes called other people’s elected officials—to speak out, while also doing my best locally to support and encourage our own community to do what we can here and now.

And so it has turned out that I have returned to this article, “How to Stay Outraged Without Losing Your Mind,” many times as a way to practice my own resiliency, because, as it turns out, the things the author lists—borrowed from well-seasoned activists—are actually helpful.

¹ Mirah Curzer, “How To Stay Outraged Without Losing Your Mind,” 16 Jan 2017, accessed 24 Jan 2020, <https://medium.com/the-coffeelicious/how-to-stayoutraged-without-losing-your-mind-fc0c41aa68f3>

When it feels like you get the wind knocked out of you with a barrage of bad news headlines, Curzer (the author) says, it's okay and, in fact, essential, to unplug. Don't get *used* to the bad things, take a break from them. You don't want to become desensitized. "Make your activism fun," she says, "play to your strengths." If you're a great organizer, have a letter writing party. If you're an artist, make art with a conscience." If you're a teacher, bring anti-bias and justice curriculum into your classroom. If you're a lawyer, do some *pro bono* work. If you like to argue, call out a sexist or racist comment when you hear one. Love to bake? bring cookies to organizing meetings or a homeless shelter.

But also, Curzer says, take care of the basics. "Go to therapy, get enough sleep, go to the doctor, exercise," spend time with loved ones, carve out some 'you' time, eat well—healthily *and* deliciously. Get outside and breathe some fresh air, "make your bed, and call your mother if you can" she says. That's how you stay outraged (because we should be) without losing our minds, she says.

I might add, spend some regular time in a supportive faith community. Because these small, regular practices keep people going when it seems like the world has too much conflict, pain and suffering to go around. These things are sustaining. Anchoring.

When Paul is writing about to the congregation in Philippi, he is writing to anchor them. To sustain them. Paul had a beloved relationship particularly with the Philippian church. They were close. So it was all the more difficult that Paul was writing his letter to them from jail, under threat of execution by the Roman Empire. He was writing knowing that this letter to them could be his last. And in this potentially last letter, Paul gives them the most important essentials he can muster.

To the leaders of the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, he says, keep leading (the fact that they happen to be female leaders is just icing on the cake). Support one another in community, and.... Rejoice. Rejoice—not because it's easy but because it's a perspective that change how we look at and engage with the world. Rejoice—because it's a way to look at the harsh realities of the world and say, "this isn't all there is. God is near, always working to make good out of whatever situation arises." Rejoice, because it's how you stay outraged (which they should have been – the Roman empire was trampling them) and not lose your mind. It's a defiant kind of joy.

So Paul encourages them to: 1. lead, 2. support one another, and 3. rejoice. And though they sound this way at first, these aren't Christian niceties. As another preacher has said, they sound "sweet and familiar" but aren't simply "something nice to needlepoint and hang over the piano."² Paul is choosing his words carefully, thinking about what things he *needs* to say, wants the Philippians to know in case this *is* his last communication with them. These words have life and power in them. Because the context in which he wrote them, while imprisoned and writing to his beloved community, is everything.

And it makes *me* think that though I often have issues with Paul's theology, these are words that still have power today. In a time that is uncertain, in a world where there seems to be too much pain and struggle to go around, Paul's words to the Philippians might help us, too. Though our world is very different, filled with complex issues, it may help to remember that Paul's world, the Philippians world was also "awash in despots, destruction and despair."³ And it wasn't Paul's or Euodia's or Syntyche's or anyone else's job to fix everything that was wrong

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 145-9.

³ Matthew Laney

with the world. It isn't *our* job to fix everything. We do what we can, and one of the things we can do—we *must* do—Paul says, is...Rejoice. "while this world will always be imperfect there are often moments of extraordinary beauty and grace that require nothing less than our abundant joy."⁴ Joy, which is somehow deeper than happiness, somehow has a wellspring that is accessible no matter what is going on in the world.

You see, joy, rejoicing, isn't naïve. Paul isn't saying rejoice as if he doesn't see the horrible realities around him. He's saying it in the face of these realities. Rejoicing "isn't a form of denial. Neither is it an exercise in the power of positive thinking. It is an expression of holy resistance." It is a refusal to let hardships—random violence, bullying, racism, environmental rollbacks," billionaires getting richer at the expense of the most vulnerable—it is a refusal to let those realities rob us of a capacity for joy.⁵

Maybe joy, rejoicing, doing all of the things to stay outraged without losing our minds, are the ways God has woven perseverance and tenacity into the fabric of life. It's a lovely way of dwelling in the things that can keep us strong, keep us nourished on the journey.

Paul would never see the Philippians again. It turned out that this was his last communication with them. And in choosing his last words carefully, he wrote. "Rejoice. Again I say rejoice." And he uses the same word many times through his communications in the letter, its not just in our snippet of scripture today. From the perspective of a person looking back on their life, reflecting from a jail cell on what's important, *this* is what Paul chooses to say. He chooses not to ignore the present realities. And he focuses on the things that no hardship, no situation, no person, no empire can take away. As we face a big year, in our country, and in our church...as we step out tenderly and boldly into the unknown, may we dwell in the joy that is all around us. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say Rejoice. Amen.

Benediction

You were created for joy. Dwell in that holy defiance in the face of whatever struggles you see, and go with God's blessing in peace, in the name of the Creator, Christ and the Sustaining Spirit, Amen.

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⁴ Emily Heath

⁵ Matthew Laney

Matthew Laney:

Rejoice? Seriously, Paul? Obviously you didn't live in a time where people get mowed down at worship or at a concert or at a march for peace; a time when our leader flaunts bullying, racism, and environmental rollbacks; a time when executives and stockholders get richer while workers are left further behind; a time when a child dies from hunger every ten seconds.

Rejoice? Don't be naive, Pastor Paul.

Reading this cheery ancient scripture next to dreary current headlines, we have to remind ourselves that **Paul's world was awash in despots, destruction and despair, far more than ours. He knew all about hardship.**

Maybe that's why Paul tells the Philippian church to rejoice twice. When I repeat myself, it's usually because I want to emphasize my point ... or because I can't think of anything else to say. Never short of something to say, Paul repeated himself to emphasize the discipline of rejoicing as an act of resistance when injustices and struggles pile up.

In fact, Paul uses the words "joy" and "rejoice" 15 times in this letter. Did I mention Paul was in prison when he wrote it? That's leading by example. He said if he should be sentenced to death, he would still rejoice. **I'm reminded of young people singing joyfully in jail during the civil rights movement, and of a friend who battled cancer with laughter and levity until it took her life.**

This sort of rejoicing isn't a form of denial. Neither is it an exercise in the power of positive thinking. It is an expression of holy resistance, refusing to let hardships rob us of our joy in the Lord. If we do that much, we triumph, even if we die.

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Emily Heath:

Alice Walker once wrote that "Resistance is the secret of joy!" I believe that. I also believe that it's inversely true as well: Joy can be resistance to the forces that would destroy us.

As a young activist I believed that it was irresponsible to be joyful while injustice flourished in the world. Happiness felt almost sinful while others suffered.

Later in life I learned that it wasn't my responsibility to fix everything. And I also learned a lot about joy. I learned that though this world will always be imperfect there are often moments of extraordinary beauty and grace that require nothing less than our abundant joy.

Paul wrote to the church in Philippi and told them to "rejoice." It's worth noting that he was likely writing his letter from a jail cell. If anyone had reason not to be joyful, it was Paul. And yet, even in the midst of injustice, he found reasons for joy, and evidence of God's peace.

If that isn't resistance to the forces of evil in this world, I don't know what is.

Alice Walker wrote in *The Color Purple*, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." My guess is it also pisses God off when we don't notice the goodness in our lives, and give God our joy.