

Finding Joy

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 14, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Psalm 85:8-13 (NRSV)

⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹²The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Today, we begin a new four-week series: Finding Joy. Using Paul's letter to the Philippians, we will consider how we might build lives of celebration and peace in Jesus Christ.

Seeking and Finding Joy

I don't know that there is a better word to describe the life I seek than a life filled with *joy* ~ the joy of a loving relationship with God, with my wife, with my children and family, with my friends, with all of you at St. Andrew. The joy of a job well done; the happiness of purpose and fulfillment. The celebration of all that is good and wonderful about life. This is what I seek . . . but such joy can be so hard to find!

A recent article in the *New York Times* caught my eye: "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness."¹ The author traces the work of several researchers on our search for happiness. What they've found is no real surprise. We humans are dreadful when it comes to imagining how we'll feel about something in the future. As the author put it, "we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions." More simply stated, that new BMW isn't going to make you as happy as you thought it would and any boost it does give to your happiness won't last as long as you thought it would! The same is true on the downside; emotional

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the brief poignant letters that Paul wrote during his several imprisonments. The others are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Philippi is in Greece, but in the first century it was no typical Greek town. Having about 10,000 inhabitants, Philippi was on the *Via Ignatia*, the major highway connecting Asia Minor and the Adriatic Sea. Named for Alexander the Great's father, Philippi had the status of a Roman colony – its inhabitants were Roman citizens, with all the attendant privileges. City inscriptions were in Latin, not Greek. City government was modeled on Rome, not Athens. Philippi was very "Latinized."

Eugene Peterson calls Philippians "Paul's happiest letter." Most commentators would agree. Perhaps this is because we read the letter knowing that Paul wrote it from prison, in circumstances that most of us will never face. Yet, in his adversity, Paul finds reason to celebrate everywhere he turns and he prays that the Philippians will themselves find the joy that God has given him. Indeed, Paul writes that the Philippians themselves bring him great joy – they occupy a special place in his heart.

I urge you to find an easy-to-read version of Philippians (such as the *New Living Translation* or *The Good News*) and read the letter through in one sitting. Do this several times over the coming weeks as you seek to find joy in your own life. Take the time to read slowly, even prayerfully.

¹by Jon Gertner, published in the *NY Times* on September 7, 2003.

devastation was less intense and shorter-lived than people expected. Mistakes we make in understanding what to expect from a raise or a new car or a new house lead directly to poor choices. We think we know what will make us happy or content or joyful – but we don't. The truth is that it is easy for us all to spend most of our lives looking for joy in all the wrong places.

In this series, we'll listen to some of the psalmists and to Paul, as we seek to understand where and how we'll really find the joy that we seek. Each week, our scripture passages will be taken from a psalm and from Philippians.

This week, the psalmist focuses on God's promises of peace and salvation. What glorious and joyful expressions of our hope: "righteousness and peace will kiss each other . . . faithfulness will look up from the ground . . . The LORD will give what is good." Surely, this is something to rejoice in, to celebrate! Surely, the psalmist points us in the right direction as we begin our journey toward joy.

Rejoice! Celebrate!

When we read Paul's words in v. 4, "Rejoice . . . again, I say Rejoice!" many of us tend to see it only as some sort of internal feeling or experience, as if Paul is saying "Be happy!" or "Be filled with joy!" But that doesn't really capture Paul's intent. Peterson renders the verse this way: "Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him!" Tom Wright renders it this way: "Celebrate joyfully in the Lord all the time. I'll say it again: celebrate!"

In the Bible, the experience of joy and the expression of joy are very close to the same thing. Joy is what happens at festivals and feasts and weddings. Jesus would often tell stories of God's great banquet to which all would be invited. Such occasions are celebrations of our relationship with God and the goodness of his creation. Indeed, what better to reason could there be to celebrate – Jesus is Lord!

Wright notes that after urging the Philippians to celebrate, Paul reminds them they are to celebrate with gentleness. The NASB has "let your gentle spirit be known to all." Perhaps Paul knows that human celebration can easily turn into raucous exuberance and wild partying! At all times and in all places and on all occasions – even in our celebration of the Lord – others are to see in us the fruits of God's Spirit who dwells in us all: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22).

The path of prayer

Several weeks ago, Robert told you that we are beginning an initiative at St. Andrew aimed at helping us to be a more prayerful congregation. If you re-read today's passage from Philippians you might think we chose it with the prayer initiative in mind. We didn't – though perhaps God had it in mind for us!

In this passage, after urging the Philippians to celebrate that Jesus is Lord (after all, what could be more worthy of celebration!), Paul reminds them that "the Lord is near." We can't be sure exactly what he means, but certainly, Paul's phrase reminds us that Jesus is with us always *and* that he will return to usher in the fullness of God's kingdom.

Then, Paul turns immediately to prayer. He knows how easy it is for us to be worriers, leading lives beset by constant anxiety over things big and small. But this is not the path to joy or to peace. Paul urges us to set aside our worries and take everything to God in prayer – yes, everything. The word "trivial" may be in our vocabulary, but it is not in God's. We can have no need that is too inconsequential for God. There can be no goodness or blessing in our lives that is too small for our thankfulness. God wants to hear it all. God seeks a loving relationship with each of us, encompassing every tiny part of our lives. Such is true love.

It is in a confident, trusting, loving, and celebratory relationship with God that we find peace and joy. Just as it is easy for us to overestimate the joy that a BMW will bring us (and, yes, I drive one!), so we tend to underestimate the happiness, joy, and peace that will come to us from a solid relationship with God. Yet, Paul gets it exactly right. We can't even really understand the peace of God that is offered to each of us – this peace that will stand guard around our hearts and minds as we make our way through life. Prayer is the path to this peace. When we fail to pray – when we fail to live in conversation with God – we will not stay on the path to God's peace. In the coming months, as we all seek to enrich our prayer life, keep these verses close by. We cannot hear Paul's words too often.

Daily Bible Readings

(the outline is from Morna Hooker's commentary in *The New Interpreter's Bible*)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Philippians 1-4 Try beginning by reading the letter in its entirety. It is only four chapters! You might use an easy-to-read rendering like the <i>Good News</i> or the <i>New Living Translation</i>.</p>	<p>Day 2 Philippians 1:1-1:26 The letter's opening and Paul's news about himself</p>
<p>Day 3 Philippians 1:27-2:30 The Christian life (part 1) and future plans</p>	<p>Day 4 Philippians 3:1-4:1 The Christian life (part 2); Keep on keepin' on!</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 4:2-23 The letter's conclusion - exhortations and thanks</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Bible Academy starts tomorrow! Please join us!

You can still register on-line

Bible Academy classes begin this week. You can still pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex.

To register and for info go to www.standrewcl.org or www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's 9:30 class is meeting in

Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

This new class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. For the next four weeks we'll be talking about *Finding Joy*. You might begin this discussion by talking about how we usually seek joy or happiness. What stories do you have about times when you've thought something would make you happy – but it proved disappointing or fleeting? I once bought an expensive piano because I somehow had decided that it would improve a very unhappy marriage. (Yes . . . I plead insanity on that one!) As parents, most of us try to teach our own kids that a new dress or a video game won't bring them lasting happiness, but I wonder how much we take to heart our own teachings.
2. In today's passage, Paul points us toward prayer as the path to peace and joy. He urges us to pray about everything! This might be a good time to begin discussing and reflecting upon our prayer lives. Do we pray? Why? What do we pray for? How do we pray? Are we pleased with our prayer life? Do we really value it? To begin, try to open a simple, and honest, conversation about prayer. Talk about your struggles with prayer as well as your successes.