

Joy in a Savior and Unity

Today Paul talks about joy. Joy is a feeling of contentment and happiness. But it isn't necessarily the same as happiness. Joy is deeper somehow. Regardless I spent a little time trying to think of the things that made me happy. Winning a game, a nice golf shot, time to relax, the kids being helpful, a good meal. Those sorts of things. What makes you happy? What gives you joy?

The implication of all these things that give us happiness then, is that when they don't happen, well, then we wouldn't have joy, right? If the kids are fighting, if I lose the game, if I shank my shot into the cornfield. Then we get sad or angry, not happy. But can there still be joy? And sure those things I listed are trivial, but it's the same with the big things in life too. I have happiness when I get a good report from my heart and cancer doctor. I am happy knowing I have a faithful family that loves each other and forgives each other. But if any of those things change, well, then happiness is most likely replaced with sadness and probably some anger.

But that's what makes our epistle reading today so astounding. It is astounding because Paul talks about the *Joy* he has even when there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of things to be *happy* about in his life. Paul is old and he is in jail. He's not hitting any golf shots in there, or relaxing too much. In fact, he doesn't even

know what his sentence is, he may be “poured out like a drink offering” – as in letting the blood pour out of him. And lets remember what got him there, was it doing something evil? No, it was preaching the words of Jesus.

Paul has every excuse to be joyless. He could be angry at the corrupt government that persecutes freedom and the gospel. He could be angry at God for letting him, his own apostle, who preached His Word at His command, God lets him go to jail and wait for a possible death sentence. “Some thanks, God.”

We have reasons to be joyless too. I think we all do. We all know life isn't fair. “Why did I get cancer and my kid diabetes?” I wonder. “That person wronged me in this way,” we say angrily. “I don't look like the world says I should,” our young adults cry. “They don't understand, they don't see, they are out to get me.” We've all got that stuff. And it causes division among our loved ones, and us here.

Which is why Paul reminds the people of Philippi to humble themselves, to seek unity, not in interests or socioeconomics like the Church is a club or something, but unity in the scriptures and the Gospel mission. How often do we divide over things that Jesus, who has all authority, has never given a command? “They changed the name, the vote went the other way, they didn't use that resource like

they should have.” We get worked up over such things meanwhile the world tells us, in issues of truth and doctrine, to just “lighten up”? I suggest we go the other way around, lighten up on the former, tighten up on the latter. I think Paul would agree, as he tells the Philippians to stand fast on the truth, but also to be humble with one another. This is why he also tells us to not grumble. Grumble is a sinful, unbelieving complaint. Don’t get me wrong, there is room for complaints in the Church, but the sinful, unbelieving, malicious, nefarious complaint is to be repented of. Lest our joy and unity be overcome by laborious, tedious negativity and doubtful strife.

Because isn’t there plenty of that out in the world? The Church has tried for 50 years to be like the world, maybe we need to be different here. Certainly in regards to toxic, joyless strife. That stuff bombards us from the news, from social media, it’s in our homes. Our poor children are getting it all week long too. How can we ever fight back? Look what Paul says: If there is ANY encouragement in Christ, ANY comfort from love, ANY participation in the Spirit...” Any at all! To give into discord, strife, hatred, arrogance, and selfishness is a confession that, “I guess there isn’t any Christ, or comfort, or love, or Spirit around.” That is no place to live. Indeed, it’s impossible to live there, at least with joy and hope.

Yet here is Paul in prison surrounded by such things. With every reason to grumble, to complain, to rage against those in the Churches he planted who left for petty reasons or deemed it not important enough to come while he sits in chains... But Paul is not angry, he is not sad or depressed, and, while he may not be happy, he has joy! And with his life in the balance he thinks to write a letter to a Church he planted, the Church in Philippi. The question then, is what is the secret to his joy in the face of adversity? What makes it so he can rejoice in even those unhappy circumstances?

Because he knows he has a Savior. A Savior who gives him life that no “pouring out” of his blood could take away. And that joy compounds so that even in prison and facing death, he has joy because, one, the Church he planted in Philippi is unified. “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, have the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” It compounds more because that same Church he planted is, “holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.” And what is he saying there other than, “I can die a happy man knowing that you all believe in Jesus and His Word.”

And what is more Christ like than that? What is more faithful than that? To have joy in someone else’s salvation as you suffer. Isn’t that what Christ did? Suffered

so others, so we, might have life? Our Lord, with authority over all things, with authority over the Pharisees and chief priests, with authority over the Pontius Pilate, and the soldiers, with authority over the wind and waves and sun and stars, let himself be a victim of circumstance. Where he let one weasel of a disciple betray him, where he let a handful of measly soldiers arrest him, where he let a few courts tell lies about him, where he let a few strips of leather interlaced with rock and bone whip against his back, where he let a few weak fists hit his face, and a few nails held him to a tree. He could have changed any of those circumstances, but he didn't. He didn't because of the joy set before him. Joy of life, life with you. He endured them so that when Paul, or we, or any of his people claimed by him in faith, when we go through the terrible circumstances of life and death, well, we might have hope and deliverance from them.

Because our Savior has authority, not just over all those things I just listed, but also over death, He rose again and gives eternal life to his people. And that gives our God joy. The angels rejoice, have joy, when a sinner repents and confesses Jesus as their Savior. Nothing makes God happier than someone being brought into his family, he loves it so much he was willing to suffer and die that we might be his.

And so Paul tapped into that joy. That is the secret to joy, that is the secret to contentment. It's the peace of God, peace not meaning that everything is fine and quiet or even happy, but peace meaning no matter if your world is falling apart and you are in pain or in prison or full of sin and strife, well, you have Jesus, so you will be just fine. So let us be people of joy! The suffering the circumstances, they go away, but you live forever.

So when the little, non-scriptural things come up, maybe we can lighten up a bit and bear with one another. It's messy, yes, it might not be fun, no, but it is a God pleasing thing to do. And when the big bad things come, the sicknesses, funerals, big sins, well then we can turn to our God and find joy knowing that in spite of all that is against us, we will be OK. Let us find joy in that salvation won for us, let us celebrate those who have that same salvation and share it with even more. Let us gather together and confess the same truth and hope in Jesus and share it with a world that could desperately use some joy. Amen.