

## A Word on Joy

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text: Philippians 4:1-9

4<sup>1</sup>Therefore, my sblings, 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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>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 honourable, 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. <sup>9</sup>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.

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Well friends, people have often called me a very positive person, but now I have scientific proof.

The worst part of the week was not being sick. The worst part of CoVid isolation was missing community. Because our community is so full of joy, especially in October. I was totally envious of the pie festival goings on yesterday, wanted to be there, wanted to experience the joy of community that we experience on these amazing occasions as church. Many of you have been there - the pumpkin patch unloading, the Christmas pageant, Confirmation Sunday - or just an ordinary Tuesday morning in Bible Study, an average Sunday morning when you're met with a loving smile, the day when someone from Pilgrim calls you to check in. Moments when, "as we learn to love each other, God lifts us to a "Joy divine."<sup>1</sup>

This week I felt a little bit like Paul, writing to the Philippians. Paul, you'll remember, wrote this letter from isolation, though he was in a prison cell and was confined there far longer than a week. He wrote to the church at Philippi and you can tell that he was a little anxious about these good folk.

See, Paul had been there at the beginning of their church - he had a stake in their flourishing. Acts 16 records Lydia's founding of their congregation:

**"14** One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of

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<sup>1</sup> Phrase by William Carl, Jr.

God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. **15** When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."

Come and stay at my house, Lydia said, and they did. And a Christian community grew up there in Philippi. And where there's community, there's joy.

Last week, Sarah preached my sermon (thanks again, Sarah - it takes a community!!) and talked about God's joy. *What brings God joy? Creating beauty; offering strength; finding what has been lost; welcoming people home.*

What brings people joy?

One way people experience joy is within community. People experience joy within community where we are known and loved and welcomed.

Now, yes, some of us find joy in solitude - and even those of us who are extroverts need a little solitude. We know Jesus himself needed solitude, going away regularly to pray on his own. But Jesus also modeled joy in community. I'm not talking happiness, I'm talking something deeper than happiness or pleasure.<sup>2</sup> One

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis makes the distinction: joy is "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again."[\[1\]](#) C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, page 28 (ebook)

of the enduring metaphors for joy that Jesus taught us is the Great Banquet, which we re-enact every time we have communion.

When Jesus was no longer the one breaking bread and multiplying fish, his followers founded communities of people who followed his way. With the exception of some hermit monks, Christianity has never been an individual sport.

Usually, when I read this section from Philippians 4, I begin at verse 4 rather than including the first several verses. Verses 4-9 contain universal truths and a good word for everyone in every age. But verses 1-3 seem bound to a specific time and place and community. Also, Euodia and Syntyche are horrible names to pronounce, and I hate to give those names to liturgists. But I made sure to include these two of Paul's co-workers in the faith, leaders of Lydia's church, today. They're a reminder that real people make up churches.

Paul worked with actual communities. He worked with real and specific communities. Having met Lydia and her household, having been a co-worker with Clement and Euodia and Syntyche, he knew this group of people, and he called upon them - an imperfect community dealing with challenges - to treat one another with love and gentleness, and to rejoice.

“A 'test of what is real is that it is hard and rough. Joys are found in it.” - Simone Weil

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No human community is perfect - but centered in Christ, churches are joy-ful.

Scott Hoezee says -

“The church was founded on grace alone and this side of the kingdom it will continue to depend on grace as well. We’ll never make it on our own. But we will make it. Somehow. Some way. By God’s grace in Jesus, we’ll make it as [siblings]. Some days we can see that truth pretty clearly, other days it’s most decidedly something of which we catch but a fleeting glance through a glass darkly. But by grace we’ve been called into this body of Christ and by grace we’ll remain. As Paul knew, there is in that little truth more than enough reason to rejoice! I’ll even say it again: Rejoice!”<sup>3</sup>

If God’s joy comes through compassion, ours does, too. That is, to be in loving, compassionate community is joy-ful.

And I’ll tell you I’ve seen that joy, here at Pilgrim. Just this week, when a member said what it meant to them to be remembered by the care committee and that they’d like to join the care team themselves. Just this fall, hearing the choir singing so beautifully. Just this summer, working along side you at the interfaith garden. Just this spring, when our youth started feeding fifty people every month.

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<sup>3</sup> [SCOTT HOEZEE](https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-10-09/philippians-41-9/) , <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-10-09/philippians-41-9/>

Here's another thing about Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's a Stewardship letter. But there's less of Paul asking Lydia and friends for their help, and more of Paul saying thank you, and offering them encouragement. As a pastor, I think about all the places of strength in our community during stewardship season - I am thankful for all the gifts people bring. There are ways in which every church in 2022 faces challenges - no doubt - but as your pastor, I know Pilgrim church is very strong indeed.

Pilgrim is a real community, and there are actual people here with actual personalities and every once in a while actual disagreements. But it's also a place where we're gentle and prayerful and working on being just, and where we come together for joy. As the great Anne Lamott puts it, "in spite of it all, there is love, there is singing...there is laughing, there is mercy."<sup>4</sup> And, there is joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Hallelujah Anyway