

Though You Know All the Facts

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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John 6:25-35

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” **26** Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. **27** Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” **28** Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” **29** Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” **30** So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? **31** Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” **32** Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. **33** For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” **34** They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

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Philippians 4:4-9

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 be anxious 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, brothers and sisters, 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** As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

—

Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer poet, says:

“Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.”¹

Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.

Let's remember for a moment what was going on for Paul and the church at Philippi when Paul wrote this letter. Paul had converted to Christianity - you remember the road to Damascus - two or three decades before writing this letter. He'd co-founded the Philippian church fifteen years before. He'd co-founded other congregations before and after, all over the place. But he stayed in touch with each one, writing letters. Actual letters to actual people. For example, in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche were his co-workers in the ministry of the gospel. He wrote to these two women along with all of the other folks in this house church, where his letter would have been read aloud in worship. He wrote to say thank you - it was a Stewardship letter of sorts because this congregation helped him financially as he kept spreading the Christian word. The letter was also meant to

¹“Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” One online archive of this poem can be found [here](#).

encourage all of them. They were going through hard times just as he was. One reason among many: they were all under the heel of the Roman empire. Paul wrote this letter *from a Roman jail*. And he wrote to a group of Christians *who were persecuted for their beliefs, beliefs that Roman authorities would not tolerate*.

So Paul wrote to encourage. To tell the church at Philippi - be good, be courageous, follow Jesus, and when you're afraid, remember that God is right there with you.

They knew all the facts, and they had a lot to pray about. They had a lot to bring before God. And Paul encouraged them to practice rejoicing and giving thanks. In spite of, in the face of, the facts.

Rejoicing, here, is not silly. It's not shallow. It's not feeling happy, it's not a feeling at all - it's an action. It does not ignore challenge. And although the translations we have seem to have Paul denying the Philippians' fear, I think he's doing something different. I think he's giving them a tool to transcend fear, anxiety, pain. A way through anxiety.

Let me say - Paul's advice was not aimed at folks with anxiety disorders or serious medical conditions, nor is mine. What I'm offering this morning is not mental health advice, it's a word for people living in the world we're all living in.

Paul didn't claim that everything was fine. He said, you're going to get through.

“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 be anxious 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.”

I am sure you have heard the same advice I have heard about a gratitude practice. The simple act of sitting down to give thanks, making a list of what is good, telling God thank you, has a strengthening and calming effect on us. Thanksgiving opens a conduit to peace, to the peace which surpasses all understanding. A gratitude practice is a tool of resilience. A gratitude practice is one specific thing we can each do.

A family in this congregation has chosen to deliver part of their meal to a household that doesn't have enough food. We know that helping others also brings joy - even when it's hard. Tomorrow night I'm connecting with a friend I haven't seen in a while, and I will rejoice in seeing her.

Theologian M. Barclay puts it, "Joy is an essential component of our work for liberation, of building the kind of world we long for....we practice living what we desire to see manifested in the world. And hopefully, that's a world with joy."²

In recent years African-American theologians and leaders have proclaimed *Black Joy*. That is, they have claimed joy as resistance, joy as resilience, joy in spite of racism, joy as a tool to survive.

Derek Terry from the UCC's ONA Coalition writes:

"As a Black Queer person...let's talk about something that doesn't always get the spotlight—Black Joy. In a world that constantly tries to wear us down, joy is not an escape; it's a tool, a declaration that we are still here, still thriving, and still worthy of love, laughter, and rest. And this isn't just a *Black* thing—this is a lesson for anyone who has ever been marginalized, for anyone who has ever felt like the world was trying to erase them. **Joy is resistance.**"³

This kind of joy has considered all the facts, and chooses to survive.

² Enfleshed: Liturgy That Matters, December 15, 2019.

³ <https://openandaffirming.org/blackjoy/>

The world may not have been perfect yet.
It may not have been what God wanted it to be yet.
Their lives were not easy.
And Paul said, rejoice, anyway.
Even though.
Because God was with them.
The Lord is near, Paul said.

Be good. Take courage. Rejoice.

I think this is a tool for us, 2000 years later. Because I know we're going through hard times. Some that we share in common - some that are unique to each one of us. I think joy and thanksgiving are a choice, and strategy.

This week some of us will be at big tables, some folks will be with people that frustrate you, others will be alone. All of us have choices about how we approach Thanksgiving. As you're planning out your week, make room to for rejoicing, for joy, for the joy that is deeper than ease - joy that connects us with God. Thanksgiving that connects us with that peace which surpasses all understanding. That joy that we choose, though we have considered all the facts.

Derek Terry offers this commission, "let's make joy a priority. Let's reclaim it, protect it, and share it. Let's dance, laugh, and rest—not because we're ignoring the struggle, but because we refuse to be consumed by it."⁴

Remembering that Paul was in prison when he wrote these words and his recipients were in deep trouble when they received these words - maybe that makes it seem just a little more realistic to us that we could, in fact, bring it all before God with thanksgiving, rejoicing anyway, and all the time.

Amen.

⁴ <https://openandaffirming.org/blackjoy/>

