

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**Excursion #2: Falling**  
***“Excursions in Joy”***  
**Philippians 2:5-18; 3:1, 4b-14**  
**November 15, 2015**

He's falling.

Suddenly falling, and it's terrifying.

Every muscle in his body is automatically tensed. His stomach is knotted up in his throat. His eyes open wider. His throat is choked off so that he can't breathe let alone scream.

He's falling and there is nothing around to grab. Nothing to stop his fall but the hard ground. There is nothing he can do... and in that split second he realizes just how vulnerable he is... falling.

It's the worst feeling.

We hate being vulnerable, don't we? In fact, I'd venture to guess that you spend a significant amount of energy every day and every year doing an awful lot to avoid being vulnerable.

And sometimes you really should. You get in the car and the first thing you do is strap on that seatbelt... and you feel safer. Every now and then, you check your retirement. Is that nest egg going to be enough?

Everyday you check on your kids. Let's be honest. If you could send them to school in bubble wrap to keep them from getting hurt...you probably would. Come on, admit it. Or at least you'd wrap up their hearts to keep those sacred places from getting scared up. You hate how vulnerable they are because it makes you feel vulnerable.

And then when they get a driver's license your heart goes into palpitations and you can't sleep while they're still gone... and you can't imagine it could get any worse, until a few years later you're sending them off to college and you know that your bubble wrap can't reach that far. And the vulnerability of that just kills you.

If it's not your kids that make you feel vulnerable, then maybe it's taking care of your parents: vulnerable.

or maybe is waiting for the biopsy to come back from the doctor: vulnerable.

or it's living by the tyranny of other people's opinions of you: vulnerable.

or maybe it's initiating intimacy with your spouse: vulnerable.

or maybe its loosing a job or failing at your job: vulnerable.

or maybe it is simply knowing that at any moment you could take a fall... a fall of one kind or another... the kind of fall where there's nothing to grab, and there's nothing to do but hit the bottom... where everything would change for you.

It could happen to any of us. And that vulnerability is terrifying, isn't it? And so of course, it's only natural for us to avoid vulnerability as much as we can. But there's just one problem with all that avoidance. The center of our faith, the center of the Jesus story, the story we're supposed to follow .... is a movement into vulnerability.

At least that's how the scriptures describe it: **"Though he was in the form of God, he didn't consider being equal with God something to grasp or cling to... but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave by becoming a human being."**

– God becomes vulnerable.

It's the beginning of what's known as the Kenosis Hymn. Kenosis is the Greek word that means "Self-emptying." It's what the Jesus story is all about. God self-empties – by becoming a human. And then self-empties by becoming obedient to death.. even death on a cross. In Jesus, God is falling into vulnerability: And this is the good news.

It's this great movement of self-emptying that Paul says we're supposed to imitate: **"Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus"**... he begins... **"Who though he was God, he emptied himself... lower and lower..."** The Jesus story is a story of falling... of vulnerability... and we're supposed to go and do likewise.

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If you're paying attention, then it's about now where you should be thinking to yourself, **"Well geez, this is the most downer of a sermon on joy I've ever heard."**

I get that, but here the thing we have to learn: **Vulnerability is joy's constant companion.** Let me say that again, because it's right at the heart of Philippians and right at the heart of the gospel. Vulnerability is joy's constant companion. Or to put it another way, **"There is no joy without vulnerability."**

Brene Brown is a research professor who has become an expert in the area of vulnerability. Through thousands of interviews she stumbled onto this connection which was really surprising for her. She said, **"When we loose the ability or willingness to be vulnerable, joy becomes something we approach with deep foreboding."**<sup>1</sup> In other words, we don't trust it. We keep it at bay.

Another way she puts it is this: **"When we spend our lives pushing away vulnerability, we can't hold space open for the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure of joy."**<sup>2</sup>

*In other words, if we want to cultivate joy, we must learn the risky practice of vulnerability, because vulnerability is joy's constant companion.*

Chances are, you've experienced that along the way.... the connection between those two. Remember when you fell in love... how vulnerable that felt?

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<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 118.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 122

Or that time you work hard on a project, on some creative endeavor, and as meaningful as the work is, you wonder how it would be received? if it will be appreciated? if it would be criticized?

Joy and vulnerability... go hand in hand.

I think of those nights, standing over one of my kid's crib... watching them, this beautiful wonderful little miracle of a person... and then getting in bed and suddenly, **"What if they stop breathing? What if I wake up in the morning and walk in there and they are blue?"** And so I make myself get back up and check on them again. (I'm sure you never did that right?)

Joy and vulnerability are all mingled together. It's why I mentioned last week that fear is the opposite of joy, not sadness. Fear is what keeps us locked up tight, protecting, guarding, perfecting, unable to leap off the edge. **Fear is what keeps us avoiding vulnerability at all cost... including the cost of our joy.**

Well, Paul says, **"Make my joy complete... Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus... who emptied himself..."** the great movement of vulnerability. And it is through that movement, and because of his self-emptying, **that God exalted Jesus and gave him the name above all names..."**

There is this complementary movement to vulnerability ... a self-emptying, and then a being carried by God. Jesus emptied himself. Therefore God exalted him high above everything in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And then in verse 17 Paul says he's doing the same thing, **"I am being poured out like a drink offering... upon the altar for you,"** he says. It's Paul's own self-emptying. **"And it fills me with Joy. Now rejoice with me. Join in my joy!"** he invites them and us.

Vulnerability. Self-emptying. Being poured out... it is all a movement into joy.

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He's falling. Suddenly falling, and it's terrifying. Every muscle in his body is automatically tensed. His stomach is knotted up in his throat. There is nothing around to grab. Nothing to stop his fall but the hard ground.

He knew he shouldn't have come here today. He knew this would happen. And in a moment his life flashes before his eyes. It takes just a split second, but he sees it all... the beautiful, the tragic. And he sees himself for who he is... not who he tried to be, or who he wanted others to think he was, but simply who he is.

And in the falling... all those false identities are stripped away... which is scary, in-and-of-itself.

Most of us won't let that happen until we have no choice. There are a hundred different things we do to make a certain impression on those around us. There are a hundred things we do to keep propping up our self image... propping up what the Spiritual Tradition calls our "false self" or our "small self"

It's all those little identities that we try to hold onto in order to feel accepted, or to feel significant, or to feel like we belong, or that we're in control. You know those small identity we wrap ourselves in?

Sometimes it's hard to recognize. They are just so ingrained in us. We can't tell the difference between them and our true self. If you're wondering what some of them are for you, just imagine how you'd introduce yourself at a party. **"Hi my name is Chris. I'm a fill-in-the-blank"**

"Hi my name is Chris. I'm a pastor." Sure that's true. or it's at least part of the truth, but certainly not the whole truth. And it can be awfully easy for us pastors to loose ourselves in that identity.

Hi I'm Chris. I'm a Royals fan.  
I'm a parent  
I'm a white middle-class male  
I'm a musician, a wanna-be athlete.

I don't know what it is for you...  
I'm a hipster, a soccer mom, a business woman, a Baptist.

I don't know how you'd fill in the blank. But the spiritual tradition tells us that those are all constructs that we use to create our small self.

They aren't necessarily bad or wrong, they're just smaller than your true self, less than your true identity given by God. ... and any of them can become dangerous when they take over your identity.

So, Paul says that those small-self labels and identities that we use to make ourselves feel valuable and worthy... are all going to have to fall away in order to find joy. He certainly had his own list:

I'm circumcised,  
I'm an Israelite, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.  
I'm a Pharisee... morally perfect.  
I'm passionate about God.  
I'm blameless.  
I've done it right. I've followed the script and gotten straight A's.

All good things. That's great, Paul.

**"But," he says, "the truth of the matter is, all those things are all rubbish compared to being found in Christ."**

That is what happens in the falling, in the vulnerability. You start to see all those small-self identities for what they are. Not something bad, but something less.

They aren't going to be the source of joy. So, at some point they have to fall away too... which may just require a great falling of your own.

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There's a practice in the Celtic tradition where Christians would go on a particular kind of journey called a *Peregrinatio*. It was a journey for the love of Christ with out a destination in mind.

Sort of like when God called Abram to go to an unknown land, "**To the land I will show you,**" God says. And Abraham just packs up his family and heads out... who knows where.

The Celtic practice was to step into a small boat called a coracle, without oar or rudder, and let the current carry them to the place that would be their resurrection. This is how Christine Paintner describes it, "**They yielded their own agendas and plans to the current of love, trusting in this deeper wisdom at work in water and wind, on behalf of the One who opens the way before us.**"<sup>3</sup>

That's the essence of this excursion in falling.

Last week we began our exploration of joy by talking about standing...

rooted in the love of God that is the "ground of all being"

the love of God that is the only thing strong enough to hold you.

And learning to trust that God's love is holding you.

***There's nothing you can do to change that or lose that.***

And now, the invitation is to stop holding on so tightly to your life... and begin to fall... fall out of all the guarding and protecting and posturing...

fall out of all those smaller identities...

and to trust the current of love... that will carry you into joy.

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He's falling. Suddenly falling, and it is terrifying. Every muscle in his body is automatically tensed. His stomach is knotted up in his throat. There is nothing around to grab. Nothing to stop his fall. And in a moment his life flashes before his eyes. It takes just a split second, but he sees it all... the beautiful, the tragic. And he sees himself for who he is... not who he tried to be, or who he wanted others to think he was, but who he is.

And the falling is terrifyingly vulnerable and he shouts, "**Oh my God, save me!**"

...and he pull the cord

and the pack opens up

and the chute inflates.

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Valters Paintner *Seasons of the Soul*, "The Soul's Migration: Where Will You Fly?" September 23, 2014.

*He's falling and laughing at the sheer joy of being alive,* with the wind in his hair and his heart pounding with life.

And he's no longer really sure whether he falling or flying.

The only thing he knows is that he's vulnerable and carried by the wind... and **he has no idea where he'll land.** But that's OK. He's stopped trying to predict it all, and plan it all out.

Instead he looks across the horizon and sees how beautiful all of it is... The green pastures and still waters...even the valley of the shadow of death. He knows that wherever this falling takes him **“goodness and mercy will follow him”**

...because there is a sacred wind shepherding him there.

For today, he's simply falling.

And his pounding heart is full.

And he's learning joy.

Amen.

Reflection:

*When we spend our lives pushing away vulnerability, we can't hold space open for the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure of joy.*

~ Brené Brown