

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
Excursion #1: Standing
“Excursions in Joy”
Philippians 1:9-11; 3:17-4:1
November 8, 2015

It's near the end of his life. Paul's in chains. He's waiting to hear what the verdict from Caesar will be: Death or life. Freedom or imprisonment. Of course, it's not the first time he's seen the inside of a prison cell. In fact he's seen worse. He's been shipwrecked and kicked out of cities. He was once stoned and left for dead.

If that wasn't enough... people liked to poke fun of the way he talked and the way he looked.... the short homely bald man that rumor has it he was.

And now he's at the end of his life. And he writes this letter to one of the congregations that he is closest to. Philippians is a uniquely personal and heartfelt as letters in the New Testament go. And in this letter there is one idea that he keeps coming back to again and again...one word... one movement of the soul that keeps resurfacing:

...and that is joy.

That's a bit counterintuitive in light of how things are ending up for Paul. I'm not so sure joy would be the main thing flowing out of my heart onto paper if I were locked up: It might be more like, **“Hey guys, Get me the heck out of here!”**

Or **“Why did God let this happen?”**

Or maybe... depending on how locked up tight my heart was and how dark the cell is I'm in... I might be writing something like: **“Never mind, Philippians. Apparently Jesus doesn't care about us after all.”**

That's certainly what it can feel like when you're trapped in a dark place. But even now, Paul is standing in some deeper reality. In these 4 chapters, he speaks of **joy** 16 times. It is something he's cultivated and something he's inviting us to cultivate: **“Rejoice in the Lord. I will say it again, rejoice”** he writes to them and us.

So, for the next few weeks we're going to be taking excursions in joy... exploring what it is and how it is. But before we head down that road we need to first recognize that it is a road... and one that all of us are invited to take.

Sometimes we get the idea that joy is something you either have or don't have. Some folks are cheery. Some are not. Some folks have it good. Others don't. Some are happy. Some are sad. As true as that may be, it doesn't really tell us that much about joy. Most teachers will tell you there's a difference between joy and happiness. Buechner says, **“Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to—a good marriage, a**

rewarding job, a pleasant vacation,”¹ but joy is as mysterious, as unpredictable as the Spirit of God who is it’s source.

Joy and happiness: there seems to be an important distinction.

I do think it’s worth noting that,
just as these are two different words in English,
there are two different words in Greek, one for happy and one for joy.

And the scriptures don’t tell us to be happy.

In fact, one of the great misunderstandings of Christianity is that we’re promised happiness or that we’re supposed to be happy... and if we’re not... then we’re not a “good Christian” (whatever that’s supposed to mean).

It’s been an incredibly hurtful and destructive lie that’s slithered it’s way into the church and on Christian bookshelves from time to time. Because rather than being honest, it invites us to pretend... to paint on our plastic smiles and not let anyone see what’s really going on.

And if you think about it, it’s somewhat surprising that the “Fake Happy” has had such a powerful hold over much of the church when you consider the fact that Jesus was not always happy:

Jesus wept at the loss of his friend Lazarus.

He was in agony in the garden, when he sweat drops of blood...

And of all the seven last words recorded on the cross, none of them were, **“Why the long face, Mom. Cheer up!”**

Happiness isn’t the goal... anymore than Jesus was always happy.

And yet, Jesus did have this reputation for celebration. When the wine ran out, he made vats more. He says the kingdom of God is like a wedding feast. The other great lie that has infected the church along the way is that Christian faith is a somber thing... and if you’re spiritual then you’ve got to be serious all the time... because Jesus certainly was.

That couldn’t be further from the truth. Jesus got in trouble with the religious leaders of his day for having too much fun, attending too many parties, eating too much food and drinking too much wine, and healing too many broken hearts.

Jesus lived with deep and great joy... joy that we’re invited into. To the faithful servants he says, **“Come and enter into the joy of your Master.”**

Joy is something we’re invited to enter.... but it isn’t something we start with.

It isn’t a beginner’s virtue. That’s the tricky part.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 58.

Joy isn't just passed out with your Church Membership card. It's available to us all... but it is a "fruit" of the 'spirits work in your life. Which is to say... **it comes after seasons of growing and deepening and ripening.** It's not a beginner's virtue.

The Ancients thought of joy as a "culmination of being."² In other words, it's not a flippant as our circumstances the way happiness is. Joy is cultivated over time. It's something that comes as the culmination of a journey. That's why we're taking these excursions for the next few weeks.

Joy has been planted in you, but there is some gardening and growing that is needed in order to taste it's fruit.... and to live from as Jesus did.

About a month ago I was visiting with an older member of our congregation who told me I could tell this story. She said, "*You know, Chris, I was baptized as a child. I've been in church my whole life. I told other's about God's grace and love for **them**.*

But it wasn't until about 5 years ago that I finally believed God actually loved me.... and that I experienced that love for myself."

5 years ago. It's a common story. The Love of God is so radicle... that it's hard for an awful lot of us to actually believe deeply... to trust fully that, yes.... God loves you wholly and completely.

Of course you've heard that before. I know. But there's something in us that holds it at bay...

.... there's some shame there,
... some hidden fear
.... some profound wound
.... something we hate about ourselves... that keeps us closed off from trusting that God both knows about those things... and still loves you.

It's why our first excursion starts with Paul's prayer for the church, a prayer that **Love** will become more and more rich

that Love will lead to deeper knowing and understanding, a deeper wisdom...
that love that will fill them with the wholeness that comes from Christ.

Paul's been a pastor a long time. He's seen it again and again. The basic message of God's love is also the hardest to really sink in and take hold. There's just so much to break through.

Lloyd Ogilvie was a Presbyterian minister who served as a chaplain in the US Senate, and wrote some about his own journey with this.

My formative years ingrained the quid pro quo into my attitude toward myself: do and you'll receive; perform and you'll be loved. When I got good grades, achieved, and was a success, I felt acceptance from my parents. When I became a Christian, I

² Ann Robertson, "Joy or Happiness?", sermon from 2006. AnneRobertson.com

immediately became so involved in discipleship activities that I did not experience the profound healing of grace I talked about theoretically...

I was a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh. Because of financial pressures I had to accorndion my studies into a shorter than usual period. Carrying a double load of classes was very demanding, and I was exhausted by the constant feeling of never quite measuring up. No matter how good my grades were, I thought they could be better. Sadly, I was not living the very truths I was studying. Although I could have told you the Greed words for grace and joy are charis and chara, I was not experiencing them.

*My beloved professor, Dr. James Stewart, that slightly built dynamo of a saint, saw into my soul with x-ray vision. One day in the corridor of New College he stopped me. He looked me in the eye intensely. Then he smiled warmly, took my coat lapels in his hands, drew me down to a few inches from his face, and said, “**Dear boy, you are loved now!**”³*

You are loved, now!

It’s the truth at the very heart of the gospel. You are already loved, wholly and completely... and yet so much of our life is spent with the hidden fear that it might not be true, at least not for me... I better work at it.

Here’s the other thing the Ancients teach us about joy. The opposite of joy isn’t sadness. The opposite of joy is fear. When fear is driving us, when fear is looms over us, Joy will always be elusive. I’m going to talk more about that next week.

But today, the invitation is to explore the good news of the gospel once more: Do not fear. You **are** God’s beloved child.

***There’s nothing you can do to make God love you more,
so stop trying so hard.
And there is nothing you can do to make God love you less,
so stop trying so hard.***

All that trying is just crippling your soul. And so, by Chapter 4, Paul is telling them, “**Stand firm in the Lord.**” ...which is to say, “**Stand firm...rooted in the love of God.**”

“Stand firm in the Lord.” It isn’t an invitation to arrogance. It’s an invitation to find your footing... and learning to trust that the **Love of God is the “Ground of All Being.”** It’s an invitation to learn that the Love of God is one that is firm enough to hold you up, when nothing else is.

There’s this story from the gospels where four friends were carrying a paralyzed man on a mat to Jesus, but the house where Jesus was speaking was filled and overflowing. So, they carried their friend up onto the roof, tore open a hole in the roof, and

³ ??? Look Up Source – Book.

lowered the paralyzed man down to Jesus. When Jesus saw him, he said to the paralyzed man, **“Your sins are forgiven.”** Jesus offered him the same healing truth he offers you. **“Your sins are forgiven.”**

There were some legal experts in the room who were grumbling about this, because they didn’t think he had the right to forgive sins. You probably know what their voices sounded like.

They are the same voices that keep you from believing it too...

the same voices that make you doubt Jesus’ healing for you.

They are the same voices that keep you paralyzed, unable to stand.

Jesus knew what they were saying... just as he knows the script that is always running through your head...

“I’m not good enough. I’m not strong enough.

I’m not smart enough. I’m not pretty enough.

I’m not patient enough. I’m not fill-in-the-blank enough.”

You know the script that keeps you stuck lying in that mat? Jesus hears that too. But Jesus said to those voices, **“What is easier? to say your sins are forgiven or to stay, get up and walk?”**

And then he said to the person who has been trapped in that mat for who-knows-how long, **“Stand up and walk.”**

He said it then and he’s saying it now:

“Your sins are forgiven. Stand up.”

Stop lying there in so much doubt. Stretch out those atrophied legs and put your feet on this solid ground. Your sins are forgiven. You are beloved.

Stand up, you withered and atrophied hearts.

Stand up, you doubting souls.

Stand up, you who are exhausted by trying so hard.

Stand up... you who haven’t known joy in so long.

Stand up. Find your footing. The Love of God is deep enough and strong enough to hold you even now.

Stand firm in it... and begin to discover joy.

Amen.

Meditation:

God is Love. Whoever sought to define him would be like a blind person trying to count the grains of sand on the sea shore.

- John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent