

Philippians 4: 4-9
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
June 25, 2017
Hymn Sing Sunday

The word “rejoice” which Paul uses in this passage translates a Greek word *χairo*, which simply means, “be glad.” To be glad in both Greek and Hebrew is to be filled with joy. This gladness is an intense experience. In some uses in both Greek and Hebrew to be glad indicates leaping for joy, like what happened when the Kansas City Royals scored for runs in the bottom of the ninth inning to beat the Toronto Blue jays.

What make Paul’s rejoicing remarkable are two things. First, Paul is in prison and knows that a martyr’s death is not far off. What does it take for someone under sentence of death actually to be glad—to rejoice?

To begin to understand we must get clear about the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is a passing feeling related to the experience of blessing. We are happy to see someone. We are happy to help someone. Happiness is often related to cheerfulness and having a positive attitude. Let me be absolutely clear: *happiness is a good and wonderful thing!* It is far better than gloom, jealousy and resentment.

Joy on the other hand is, or ought to be, a profoundly spiritual experience. Joy is what the great spiritual figures of all faiths describe when the clouds of doom and dread part and we see that all is well. Joy is what happens when, despite all the evidence of our experience that life is going down the tubes, the world is in chaos and there is literally no possible good outcome from any of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we realize that God is greater than the evidence of our perceptions. Joy is what happens when we stop judging the

possibility of good outcomes based on our mortal abilities and see the same circumstances in the light of God's providential power.

Christian joy goes even farther. Christian joy comes from the deep trust that in the death and resurrection of Jesus the power of evil and death to utterly destroy all goodness and all life *has been overcome*. Hence in John's gospel Jesus tells the disciples—and all future disciples that in this world we will always have trouble and suffering. *But*, he exhorts, *be of good cheer*, that is, be faithful and courageous, *for I have overcome the world*. (Jn 16:33)

Christian joy has nothing to do with what is called optimism. Instead it is the belief that despite all the evidence to the contrary, God is alive and active in the world and that to live in faith hope and love is to be on God's side. In his cell in Rome facing death and the legitimate worry over what will happen to the Christian community when he is dead, rejoices.

But equally important: Paul calls the Christians in Philippi to rejoice. They too are in a state of crisis the two leaders of the church—both women—have fallen out and the community is bitterly divided. Paul urges them to make peace and to set aside their differences for the greater good of the gospel. Then as now, few things are more dangerous to the proclamation of the gospel than bitter and angry division. Few things are more off-putting to non-Christians or people who might be attracted to God's love in Jesus than Christians fighting each other. Who wants to be part of a community where one must pick sides? How can a community be a safe place when there is finger pointing, and taking of moral inventory? There is more than enough of that experience in the world. Why go to church to get more?

Paul knows that we witness to the world one way or another. Which shall it be? Shall we witness to our need to be right and for others to be wrong? Shall we witness by our gauging

another's faith and behavior by our exalted standards or by talking about others, passing on rumors and sowing seeds of suspicion?

We cannot help but giving this painful witness sometimes. We are not stained glass saints. We are flawed human beings who by God's grace are growing in the trust that we are loved warts and all. But when we have had our individual and collective bad days we are called to give another witness. It begins with the conviction that we have behaved badly. We have (to use an old but still relevant word) *sinned* against another human being and in so doing sinned against God and God's vision of grace for the entire world demonstrated in Jesus.

Having done so, we do the courageous work of seeking and giving forgiveness. To seek to receive and give forgiveness requires a trust that we can in fact be forgiven. It requires that we trust that, indeed, in Christ *we have already been forgiven!* In other words all the horrible things we have stockpiled in our memory of wrongs we have done and which have to us are banished from God's heart. We may carry them for the rest of our lives but we can also live as free and liberated people.

We then give the witness of rejoicing to a world beaten to the point of death by the anger and brutality of the world. It is then, that we follow Paul. We "let *our gentleness* be known to everyone." We witness that "the Lord is near" and guiding our lives. We witness that there is no need to "worry about anything but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let (our) requests be known to God."

This is why we gather. It is also why we sing. In poetry and harmony the hymns we sing connect us to the love that lives far above the clouds of despair.

It is why an anonymous Christian in the first years after the terrible civil war, the assassination of a president and the slow steady descent back into racial separation and prejudice could sing:

My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation.
I hear the sweet, tho' far off hymn that hails the new creation.
Thro' all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul—how can I keep from singing?

What tho' my joys and comforts die, the Lord, my Saviour liveth.
What tho' the darkness gather 'round, songs in the night he giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that refuge clinging.
Since Christ in Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it.
And day by day the pathway smooths since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing.
All things are mine since I am his—how can I keep from singing?

Amen.