



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, October 9, 2011

“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.”

Maybe some of you have heard the story about the old Amish farmer who was on his way one evening for a night out on the town. He loaded his old hound dog into the buggy, had his favorite horse pulling the buggy, and was on his way. He had just rounded a curve in the road when a speeding Mercedes ran into the back of his rig, wiping him out.

After months of recovering, he finally had his day in court. The defense called the local sheriff as a witness. The defense lawyer asked, “Did the plaintiff have anything to say when you approached him at the scene of the accident?”

The sheriff replied, “Yes sir. The plaintiff said to me, ‘I’ve never felt better.’”

The plaintiff’s lawyer was very upset at this and whispered to the farmer, “Did you really say that?” “I sure did,” the farmer replied, “but don’t worry, just put me on the stand.”

So, the plaintiff’s lawyer called the farmer to the stand and asked, “Did you really say that you never felt better?”

The farmer replied, “I sure did, but you gotta understand. When the sheriff came on the scene, he went over to my dog who was badly injured and bleeding and looked down at him, shook his head, and then shot the dog. Then he walked over to my horse who had three broken legs, really hurt bad, looked down at him, shook his head, and shot the horse. Then the sheriff came over to me, looked down at me, and asked me how I felt. So, of course, I replied, ‘I’ve never felt better!’”

A positive attitude that saved his life! The kind of attitude that Paul is asking the Philippians and us to have. At all times, to find the good, to not worry, to give thanks, to live with peace. Listen again to his instructions to us. “Finally, beloved, 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.”

Now I’m a little uncertain whether any of you have some association with this sentence, but I certainly do. You see, this was a favorite sentence of my mother and her guide to child-rearing. We children were constantly admonished to do just what the sentence states, to think only about the just, pure, honorable, excellent, so forth. And in that vein by mother only allowed us to watch Walt Disney movies and to avoid or blank out any disturbing news stories. If something troubled us that we had seen or heard, we were to revert to remembering this sentence and shift our minds to thinking about praise and pleasantness. So, I had a reaction to this sentence then and still do to this day. As a child, I remember lying awake at night in bed, naughtily indulging in thinking BAD thoughts! My favorite was to imagine myself lying in a hospital with horribly broken legs or arms or something. And doctors or nurses would be giving me shots. Now, that was dangerous thinking for me because

my religious upbringing was in the Christian Science church, so to imagine myself needing doctors and being in a hospital wouldn't be right thinking at all. But it was more than that – somehow I had to rebel against the influence of this verse from scripture. I'm not saying that what I did was admirable or to be emulated. But I do see the importance, perhaps even the necessity of this rebellion. You see, I have spent a long time wrestling with knowing that the world did, and does, have the unjust, the impure, the horrible, and the false. And to focus on only this verse and how it tells you to behave seems to seal off the wholeness of living with reality.

So, how do we live with balance and yet do what this wonderful, joy-filled portion of scripture suggests? Well, for one thing, we do not use this reading as a prescription for a life of positive-thinking – believing that these positive thoughts will protect you from all pain or fear. They will not render you invulnerable to tragedy. The Amish farmer was really broken up and in pain. Using any of these lines today as a mantra that will assure us a continual peace and happiness is to misuse Paul's words and to deny ourselves the fullness of a life in Christ.

For there is truth in these words - they are filled with healthy, life-giving advice. I think it IS possible to live rejoicing in the Lord always. We can be filled with gentleness, peace, strength, and contentment. And the clues to this type of life can be found within the reading and the entire scope of Paul's life and motivation for writing this advice. Paul is in prison when the letter to the Philippians was written. His life is in extremely uncertain circumstances. And we know from many of Paul's letters he was often worried about what was happening to the people in the churches he'd served. Yet, Paul writes this letter what is considered by Biblical scholars to be an Ode to Joy. Joy permeates throughout all of the chapters of Philippians. And I believe that Paul truly trusts and believes the words that he writes.

How then might we live a life of continual joy? I think that there are ways for us to recognize joy as present in our lives because of the God present in our lives. First, there is the joy that comes from fellowship. Paul writes, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." And later, "Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me." This joy goes outward. Paul speaks of the fellowship we have when we share our lives with each other. It's joy that comes upon us when we are together with others, eating or playing, and we suddenly think, "I'm really enjoying myself." In fellowship, in community there are moments of laughter and appreciation of others. In the midst of others we find release from obsessing about our own personal fears and anxieties.

I think Matthew was trying to get that message across in the parable told today by Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." The people were invited to a party; they were invited into fellowship and celebration. And they didn't come. I have to get this done, and this done, and this done, and then maybe I will have time. Their personal concerns and inward focus of taking care of themselves kept them from the joining with others.

And beyond the joy of the fellowship, there is the joy that happens because we are in the presence of God, in the presence of Christ in his faithfulness. Everyone was invited to dine with the king – with God, with God's son. And they said, no – not right now. Matthew is frustrated, perhaps Jesus was frustrated, perhaps Paul felt the need to keep nudging. Look people, the party is going on around you. It is right here, right now, and you are missing it. Rejoice that God has drawn near and asked you to come close. The Lord is at hand, the Lord is present, the Lord is near. That is a reason for continual rejoicing regardless of any circumstances. That is the foundation for our lives. It is not about pretending that there are not any difficulties and sorrow in our midst. For me it is a joy that is recognized as a small smile inside of me even when I am most troubled or fretting. In the midst of pain or sorrow I can still hear the still small voices saying, "all will be well, all will be well, all manner of things will be well. And I know, I have the faith to know, that God is present and the party is right now, not tomorrow. There is peace to be found in which to rejoice.

The party is right now, not tomorrow. And we are invited to join in.

Thanks be to God.