

JOY! – “HOW TO BE JOYFUL NO MATTER WHAT”

Text: Philippians 1:12-26

Pastor Jonathan Swenson, St. Marks Faith & Life Center, 14 Sept 2008

Pre-Sermon: Beaker Video: Ode To Joy (You Tube) (within Children’s Message)

Well, if you’ve looked ahead in your bulletin, you’ll see the sermon title for today is “How To Be Joyful, No Matter What.” But let’s face the facts, as Beaker the Muppet discovered in the video in the children’s message...life *isn’t* always joyful, is it?

Case in point. Consider an example from the Swenson family these days.

This is a picture of our beagle, Daisy. We adopted her from a rescue agency 4 years ago. She is a rascal, but we love her. She brings us much joy. Now let me show you a second picture. That’s Daisy on the left. “*But who is this second dog,*” you ask? Well, you see, now that Jana is no longer working here at St. Mark’s, she has a little more time on her hands. So, when she received an e-mail from a pet adoption agency a few months ago, asking us to take April in for a while as a “*FOSTER DOG*” ... just until they found a permanent home for her...well, Jana just couldn’t say no.

Now, Jana gave me permission to tell this story. And don’t get me wrong. I like animals. And I really like dogs. But one little beagle in the Swenson household is enough for me. So far April... our beloved “*FOSTER DOG*”... has broken two dishes, taken a bite out of our living room coffee table, consistently annoyed the neighbors with her loud wailing, ripped up a bath mat, and ... my personal favorite... it seems that Daisy and April are now engaged in a turf war and are going crazy “marking their territory” all over our basement carpet. Seriously, we ended up calling the professional carpet cleaners two weeks ago... and when he flashed his neon “pee-detector” light on the basement carpet, we had an amazing mosaic pattern spanning the room from one wall to the other.

And so, I say to you my friends this morning... ***sometimes... it is HARD to be joyful....***

And what about you.... what’s going on in your life that is making it difficult to be joyful... Maybe... just maybe your college team lost a certain football game yesterday... ***Sometimes it is hard to be joyful.*** Or maybe you got a zit on your nose on the day of school pictures. Or you spilled coffee all over yourself right before the big presentation. Or you just got in a fight, in the car, on the way to church THIS MORNING! And then you had to come inside and pretend to be HAPPY! ***Sometimes it is hard to be “joyful no matter what”.***

Your co-worker gets the promotion instead of you. Your mortgage fails. Your friend betrays you. Your city floods. You lose your home or business, or your most treasured possessions. ***Sometimes it is hard to be “joyful no matter what”.***

In the past week within the St. Mark’s family a 13 yr-old member of our congregation was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes; a friend of one of our members was diagnosed with cancer; another St. Mark’s member endured her 15th surgery, and yet another St. Mark’s family attended the funeral of one of the two young men

involved in the fatal airplane accident in Dubuque. At the visitation, they embraced their dear friends, the parents of this young man, and together mourned the horrific loss of the little boy whom they had watched grow into a young man. **Sometimes, it is IMPOSSIBLE to be "joyful no matter what."**

So, how do we dare to give you a message titled, "**How to be Joyful, No Matter What?**" when we know that every Sunday morning there are people sitting in these seats who are struggling to hold on to their faith... sometimes in the midst of indescribable pain and loss. And how can Paul, in the book of Philippians, DARE to tell us to give thanks in all circumstances, and to REJOICE "*no matter what*"?

Well, to be honest, we wouldn't give this sermon, if being "**joyful no matter what**" meant that as a Christian, you are supposed to deny real pain, and anger... and loss... and somehow to paint a smile on your face and pretend that nothing is wrong.

But here is the good news. That is NOT what this sermon is about. And that is NOT what Paul's writings in the book of Philippians teach us. Instead, let me just tell you, right off the bat, that there are two different words used for "JOY" in the New Testament. One is about **happiness**... and the other is about something much deeper... And you need to know, as we begin this series... that God never intended for us to confuse the two. So, let's take a second to make sure we understand the difference...

The first of these words for joy is closer to our understanding of "Happiness". It comes from a Greek word, which is something like our word for "happstance" -- from which we get the word "circumstance". When you find *this* word in scripture Paul is talking about **a state of EMOTION** that **DEPENDS on earthly circumstances and happenings**.

And in that sense, **this** word for joy is temporary. It is more the sense of what we mean when we say something like we are having a "**happy**" time at Disneyland. But then it begins to rain, and we lose our happiness. And so, even though being "happy" or "joyful" in this sense of the word is still a good thing, it's limited. It's short-lived, and can soon be lost.

In contrast to that, the other word for Joy in the New Testament... the word that Paul is using in Philippians has to do with something much deeper and more lasting. When Paul speaks of JOY it is more of an **internal** reality. When he says, in verse 18 of Chapter One, "**I rejoice and I will continue to rejoice**" he's talking about something that is constant. It's **not** based on external circumstances. And precisely because it is **NOT** dependent on outward circumstances, Paul is going to tell us that it is possible to have joy IN ALL circumstances, however difficult they may be.

Now hear me say, again, this doesn't mean that we have to be "HAPPY" with all that life throws our way. But it DOES mean that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can have a "**spirit** of gladness" even in the most difficult of situations... **even when** we feel nothing remotely close to a *FEELING* of "joy" because this type of joy **transcends earthly circumstances**.

Now, the truth is that many people live their lives without this second kind of joy. Instead, they seem to be just enduring life. And I would guess that the reason many people live their lives this way is that they are caught up in the myth that tells them that in order to be "happy" their lives must be trouble-free. **"If I could just change my situation life would be great..." "If I could just get rid of all my problems..."** But, most of us know there's no such thing as a problem free-life.

If you brought your Bibles with you, open up to the first chapter of Philippians, and as you do that, let me give you a little background. **At the time that he writes this letter to the people of Philippi, Paul has been suffering under miserable circumstances for the last four years.** He's spent two years in prison in Caesarea for a trumped-up charge. Then he was put on a ship to go to Rome. On the way to Rome, he was shipwrecked, stranded on an island, bitten by a poisonous snake, and then had to wait the winter there before he continued on to Rome, only to spend another two years in prison awaiting trial to be executed before the Roman Emperor, Nero.

And let me give you a sense of who Nero was. Nero took delight in persecuting Christians. He would sometimes impale Christians on large, sharp poles that lined the streets of Rome. He would then have the Christians, still alive and suffering unbelievable pain, lit on fire, so that the Roman pagans could walk the streets and be entertained as they passed by. This is the Nero who controlled Rome, and this is the emperor under whom Paul was now imprisoned.

SO, what is Paul's secret? How was he able to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of these realities? Well, first of all... keep in mind as we work our way through this text, that Paul is not pretending that the circumstances are, in any way, less painful than they are. He is not putting on a silly smile and pretending to be "happy."

No, the joy that he is talking about is this second, deeper type of joy -- the one that has to do not with current, external circumstances, but with a belief in things that will last forever... with something... and **someone** that transcends earthly surrounding and circumstances, as difficult and overwhelming as they may be.

And it's in **THAT** context, and with **THAT** understanding of Joy that Paul gives us not just one, but **three** secrets, actually... or what we will call this morning, **three ESSENTIALS for joyful living**... three ways to be **"joyful no matter what."** And so, if you are taking notes, here is the first of these three...**the first essential for joyful living is this:**

I. I (WE) NEED A PERSPECTIVE TO LIVE FROM.

Every one of us has problems. You've brought yours in here with you today and so have I. But Paul reminds us that though our problems may be very intense and very real, **how we look** at those problems determines, to a great degree, how they will influence our lives. In other words, our **perspective** makes a significant difference.

Look at verses 12 and 13. Paul writes, **"Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.**

As a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."

You see Paul had always wanted to go to Rome. But this is **NOT** what he envisioned would happen when he got here. This was not the plan. **He meant to have a crusade!** Instead, he was put in prison. But God did not abandon Paul. ***And an interesting thing happened....***

During this two-year period in Rome, Paul was chained to a palace guard 24 hours a day. He had absolutely no privacy. And these palace guards were the highest paid people of the empire.... When they retired, after 12 years of service, they were made leaders in Rome. And so, there's not a more strategic group that Paul could witness to if he's going to reach the Roman Empire.

So, God puts Paul in Rome, and Nero chains a future leader of Rome to him every four hours. And think about this. That means that in two years of four-hour shifts, 24 hrs a day, Paul had an opportunity to witness to these guards 4,380 times. And remember, that these guards had an inside route to the emperor and his family. As a result even some of Nero's family became believers. History tells us that Nero had his wife, mother and children killed because they became believers.

So, in verse 14 Paul writes, ***"Because of my chains most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly."*** "I can see the best even in the worst," he is saying. I trust that God is at work in my problems even when things seem horrific, unfair, unjust... even when things don't go the way I would like. That's the perspective God invites us to live from if we're going to have **joy** in our lives.

You see, **God takes a bad situation... a terrible situation... and uses it for good.** As Paul wrote in a different letter, this one to the Romans, in chapter 8:28 ***"And we know that in ALL things God works for the good of those who love Him."***

And notice what that verse is really saying...It doesn't say, *it doesn't pretend,* that all things are "good." But it does say that God is **ABLE to WORK for good** IN all things. There's a big difference between those two statements! Let me say it again... "NOT ALL THINGS ARE GOOD.... (And I believe that when tragedy strikes... it is usually outside of God's will... a result of a fallen and broken world, in need or redeeming)... but God is able to **WORK for good, IN** all things."

See, Paul is not telling us to hold back the tears, or to just say the right Christian phrase, or to quote the right Bible verse ... or to pretend that you are not angry at God or maybe even doubting his existence. **All those feelings are part of the human experience.** But they **are FEELINGS**.... and *our faith is not based on feelings,* but on a **belief**... in a good and benevolent God who sent his Son to save us, and to redeem this broken world of tears, and who sent his Holy Spirit to help us believe, even in those times when it is hard to sense His presence.

And so, the lesson?

LESSON: God has a purpose behind every one of my problems. He doesn't **CAUSE** all of my problems, but he is able to work for good **even in the midst of them**. And that gives **us** a sense of purpose --- to live with a sense of joy even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Secondly....

II. (WE) I NEED A POWER TO LIVE ON

Let's face it; life can wear you out. One crisis after another can drain you completely until we lose nearly all of our energy. Some of us are ready to throw in the towel right now. ***"I've done the best I could, but it's not good enough and I'm tired and weary and I just don't care anymore."*** We need a fresh power supply.

And so Paul writes in verse 19: ***"I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed."***

Paul says, I have **two things that give me strength** and keep me going in spite of four years of imprisonment. One, **the prayers of other people**. (Never doubt the prayers of your fellow believers, when you yourself have no faith. They can carry you with their belief, when you are too weak to believe on your own. They can have faith, when you have no faith.) ...

And the second, Paul says, is **the help of God's Spirit....** Herbert Jackson tells the story of how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave his car running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Eventually, sickness forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station to be trained. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, ***"Why Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable."*** He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, turned the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life.

For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting the power to work. ***So it is with you and me.*** We have a God whose power is available to us when we ask for it and yet we often maintain such a loose connection with Him, we are unable to receive it!

Where do you get your hope to keep on going when life gets hard? Is that source reliable? God's answer to a personal energy crisis is found in Phil. 4:13... and I love the translation printed in your bulletin, that comes from the

Good News paraphrase of this verse. It reads, **"I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that God gives me."** That's a good translation because it puts the emphasis in the right place... I can face all conditions, **NOT** by my own power, but by the power that Christ... and Christ alone... gives me.

The lesson?

LESSON: With God's power nothing can destroy me. (Repeat) It may shake me, crush me for a time, take me down for the 10-count... but it cannot destroy me... because I have the power of Christ!

And that brings us to the third essential for deep, lasting joy. REVIEW: If we're going to make it in life, Paul says, **we need a PERSPECTIVE to live from** – and a **POWER to live on** and then, thirdly, Paul says... we need a **PURPOSE to live for**... (repeat)

3. WE/I NEED A PURPOSE TO LIVE FOR.

Now, realize that Paul is old and tired when he writes these words. He has been in prison for four years. He's ready to go on to heaven. They've taken every single thing from him --- friends, ministry, freedom, privacy. They've taken every thing from him except the one thing that cannot be taken from you... and that is **a purpose to live for.**

And **knowing** that, he writes these words in Verse 21 -- **"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."** He's not suicidal ... but he's anticipating death. And he's not afraid of dying. Death is just on to better things, out of the prison. **"But while I'm here,"** he says, **"I have a purpose for living."**

It was that perspective, and that sense of purpose that allowed Paul to continue to be productive with his life, even under the worst of circumstances. Besides witnessing to the palace guards, during his imprisonment in Rome, Paul wrote several of the books of the New Testament, including Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians. **During the worst time of his life, he accomplished some of the most important work of his life.** (Repeat) And why? Because **he knew that even then, and perhaps most especially then... he had a purpose to live for... to honor Jesus Christ, his Savior and the leader of his life.**

In summary, Paul tells us, in this passage, and throughout this incredibly uplifting book of Philippians... Paul tells us... as he draws close to his death... that **when you learn to have a greater purpose in your life than just yourself, you WILL have joy.** You see, ultimately, we are here on this earth for the benefit of other people... to tell those who don't know the Lord the Good News about Jesus Christ AND to serve each other. In other words, Paul is perhaps the first person to put it this way...

LESSON: The secret of JOY is this...

J = Jesus first

O = Others second

Y = Yourself third

Not that loving self isn't important. This isn't a denial of yourself and your needs. But Paul says, **You will truly love yourself when you learn to give yourself away,** for the sake of the Gospel.

So let's review. Lean in with me, for one last minute and apply this passage to your life right now. Ask yourself these three questions as you reflect on this passage throughout the day and week ahead... First, ask yourself...

1. **Do I have God's PERSPECTIVE on my problems?** Are you looking at them from God's viewpoint or just **your** viewpoint? God is able to WORK FOR GOD in the midst of every problem. So if you are going through a tough time right now, try praying, **"Lord, help me to see this problem from Your viewpoint. Help me to see what You want me to learn in this situation."** (And it may be nothing more than to learn to fall into his arms of grace.)

Secondly ask yourself this question...

2. **Do I have a POWER to live on?** Have you been trying to live solely on your own power to solve your problems? God says, relax. You are carrying a burden that was never intended for you to carry. Come to God and give it all to Him, **load** it all on Him and ask Him to recharge you --- physically, spiritually, emotionally. Then you can say like Paul, **"I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that God gives me in Christ."** (4:13)

And then, finally ask yourself this question...

3. **Do I have a PURPOSE to live for?** Can you sum up the purpose of your life in a single sentence? Everybody wants to live a long time, but why? Remember, **life is not judged by its duration but by its donation.** (Repeat)

There is no such thing as problem free living. The Bible never promises that. And Paul isn't teaching that in the book of Philippians. But he is teaching us this truth... **When you base your life on the kinds of values that are going to last, then problems don't go away... but they do change in terms of their ETERNAL significance.**

Yes, they may hurt... and they may even break you. You may feel broken right now. But in Christ, though tears may come... **we, like Paul, know that they will not last.** There will come a time when Jesus will wipe away every tear, and we **will be** "joyful" indeed. And until that time, remember that we live, as scripture says, **"not as those who have no hope".**

We have the **hope**, and the **promise** of Jesus Christ. And looking out from **the PERSPECTIVE** of the empty tomb, that what you see and experience right now is NOT the end of the story... and when you rely on **the POWER** of the cross more than our own strength or effort, and when we trust in God's **PURPOSES** rather than our own... when we have those three things in place in our lives, then we CAN have joy... true and lasting joy...**"no matter what."**

Amen? Amen!

Oh, and **just one last thing**... I put together a little brochure the other day. I thought I would share it with you. **(PHOTO OF APRIL... "LOOKING FOR A NEW HOME... Call... phone #, etc..")** If you know of a family who is interested, give me a call. It may not be as deep, or as lasting as the joy of Jesus... but I think April will make them "happy". And I know, when I hand her over to that family it WILL give **me** JOY... no matter what. :o) **Amen.** Let's pray.