

From the Inside-Out

Philippians 1:3-11

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There was once a young preacher who was called to two churches on the same day. Not knowing which one to take, but being sure that he wanted out of where he was, he went to his mentor and asked, "What should I do? I just want, in my ministry, to be where God is."

The wise, old pastor said, "That's easy, son. Go where the money is. God is everywhere" (Foy Valentine, *Whatsoever Things Are Lovely*, 28-29).

It's a funny joke. Well, I think it's funny, anyway, but maybe it's funnier to pastors than it is to their congregations.

I do wonder, though, how different the joke might have turned out if instead of saying that he wanted "to be where God is," the young pastor had asked, "What should I do? I just want, in my ministry, to be *happy*."

What would the wise, old pastor have said to the young pastor then?

During my senior year of high school, the school counselor called me into her office, sat me down, and asked me: "Dan, what do you want to do with the rest of your life? What makes you happy?"

Well, that was a ridiculous question to ask 18-year-old-Dan. Do you know what made 18-year-old-Dan happy? Playing video games until 2:00 in the morning. "Cruising main" with my friends. Trying to fit an entire Totino's frozen pizza in my mouth. And, frankly, awkwardly trying to put the moves on my then girlfriend who is now my wife. God bless her, she has tolerated a lot over the last two decades.

Do you know what never once crossed my mind at the age of 18 as something that would make me happy? Being a pastor, and yet here I am — and I can't imagine anything I'd rather be doing.

The truth is, pastor or not, we are all looking for happiness.

Speaking to a packed auditorium, the monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, began his speech by saying:

"There is something you know about me, something very personal. And there is something I know about every one of you that's very central to your concerns. There is something we know about everyone we meet anywhere in the world... that is the very mainspring of whatever they do and whatever they put up with. And that is that all of us want to be happy. In this we are all together. How we imagine our happiness, that differs from one person to the next, but it's already a lot that we all share in common."

He's not wrong. At the end of the day, one of the things we all share is our desire to be happy.

Of course, it's not as easy to get happiness as retailers might like us to believe. If money could make us happy, then that wise, old pastor wouldn't have given us a punchline to a joke, but sage advice.

But the truth is that we all know someone who has every resource needed to be happy — and yet they aren't. And the opposite is also true. We all know someone who has suffered misfortune after misfortune — misfortunes we would never want to experience ourselves — and yet they seem to be some of the happiest people alive.

Happiness, it seems, is not as easy to predict as we might like to believe.

In fact, research psychologist, Dan Gilbert, claims that one year after winning the lottery and one year after losing the use of their legs, lottery winners and those confined to a wheelchair are equally happy. Isn't that fascinating? You could win millions or become a paraplegic, and the end result of both will be the same level of happiness. How can that be true? ("The surprising science of happiness," *TED Talk*, April 26, 2012.)

The problem is that we assume happiness is the result of our circumstances, of our situation, of things outside of us. We keep thinking that if only we had won a hundred million dollars or gotten that promotion or finally found "the one" or aced that exam... then we'd finally be happy — but it turns out that study after study is showing that real, lasting happiness is not the result of our circumstances.

Of course, what researchers are now proving through studies, Paul already seemed to know when he wrote this little letter we call *Philippians*.

Did you know that at the time when he wrote the letter to the church in Philippi, Paul was sitting in a prison cell? He was awaiting trial before a Roman court. We don't know why he was in prison and he doesn't bother to tell us, but it's fairly safe to assume that he'd been arrested for treason. He'd been going around proclaiming news of some other king. In Rome, that was big "no-no." There was only one king, and his name wasn't Jesus. It was Caesar.

So Paul found himself in prison, anxiously awaiting his trial, knowing full well that it could end with his execution. His life was hanging in the balance and what does he say to the church in Philippi?

He doesn't say: "Help me! Help me! O, please, help me! I'm so scared, I take it all back! I'll never talk of Jesus again."

He says: "I thank my God for you every time I remember you, constantly praying *with joy* in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from

the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:3-6).

I *thank God* for you? I pray *with joy* when I remember you? I am *confident* that God will complete the good work that was begun in you?

This does not sound like someone whose life is in the balance. It does not like someone who has been imprisoned and beaten and persecuted. It sounds like what you'd expect to read in a letter from someone sitting under an umbrella on some exotic beach with a "Life is good" t-shirt on, but not from someone in prison.

Either Paul is being as disingenuous as we can possibly imagine or... he has discovered the secret of happiness. Is it possible to be happy even when life doesn't go our way?

In 1962, the manager of a Liverpool rock band fired the group's twenty-year old drummer. Pete Best had been playing with the band for two years. Just weeks after Best was kicked out, "Love Me Do" began to climb the charts. Pete Best cried. He worked for a while in a bakery. Then he put together his own group — the Pete Best Band. He toured the world with his brother and three other band members.

Best, now 80-years old, and his wife, Kathy, have been married for over fifty years. They have two daughters and four grandchildren, whom Best says he "totally spoils." He describes himself as a family man who is always happy to come home to Liverpool: "I believe it turned out for the best. I enjoy every day twice as much as the day before. I'm happier than I would have been with the Beatles" (Brett Younger, *Funny When You Think About It*, 26).

Maybe Pete Best is telling the truth. Maybe Paul was, too.

Maybe it's not what happens *to* us, but what's *in* us that makes us happy.

Of course in Christian parlance, we might not call it "happiness." We call it *joy*.

Unlike happiness, which seems to depend on our external circumstances, joy is cultivated *within*. It is sturdier than happiness and not so fickle. That's because it's not dependent on the weather or the balance of our checkbook or whether the Broncos are winning. Joy comes from the inside-out and not from the outside-in.

Don't get me wrong. Happiness is good, but joy is *better* — because if you have joy, the outside world can't touch it. No prison can take it away from you. That's because joy isn't so much an emotion as it is a virtue. And that's why it's listed with virtues like love and hope and peace in Advent.

This morning, we did not light the candle of happiness. We lit the candle of *joy*.

Philippians is sometimes called “the epistle of joy,” because the theme of joy permeates it. Paul makes use of the language of joy and rejoicing sixteen times in these four short chapters.

Here in the first chapter, he prays “with joy” every time he remembers them (1:4). In the next chapter, he exhorts the young church to “make [his] joy complete” by being unified in mind, heart, and deed (2:2ff). And before its close, he issues that now famous refrain, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and, again, I say rejoice” (4:4)!

What has sustained Paul in prison isn’t happiness, but God’s deep joy.

So how do we come into the kind of joy that can carry us through life’s difficulties?

I think it’s cultivated like any other spiritual practice. Intention is the most powerful ability that we humans have at our disposal. We *decide* to be joyful. We *choose* joy.

The proverb is right: “Those who wish to sing always find a song.” Those who wish to be joyful always find a reason to rejoice.

And, the paradox of joy is that we keep our hearts open to receiving it not by focusing on ourselves, but by focusing on others.

The author and columnist, David Brooks, points to graduation ceremonies as the perfect example of the difference between happiness and joy. He says:

“There are two kinds of emotion present at any graduation ceremony. For graduating students there is *happiness*. They’ve achieved something. They’ve worked hard and are moving closer to their goals.

There is a different emotion up in the stands among the families and friends. That of *joy*. They are not thinking about themselves. Their delight is seeing the glow on the graduate’s face, the laughter in her voice, the progress of his journey, the blooming of a whole person.

Happiness usually involves a victory for the self. Joy tends to involve the transcendence of the self. Happiness comes from accomplishments. Joy comes when your heart is in another” (“The difference between happiness and joy,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2019).

Friends, isn’t that what Paul is saying in his letter to the Philippians? He’s like a joy-filled parent watching his children graduate — witnessing the progress of their journey, thanking God for the gift of having shared the work of the gospel with them from the very beginning, encouraging them to trust the One who has begun a good work in them. He can have joy because his heart is with them.

That is why we light the candle of joy, and not the candle of happiness at advent — because this is the season when we are reminded that God’s heart is with us, too.

No matter what happens to us in this life, no matter how wrong it all goes – God’s heart is with us.

That’s why in the carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” we can sing of hardship and exile and loneliness in the verse, but the chorus is still, “Rejoice! Rejoice!” Because Emmanuel comes to you. That is Emmanuel’s nature – always coming to us, his heart always with us. That’s what Emmanuel means – “God with us.”

And so, we *rejoice*.

I may have shared this with you before, but it bears worth repeating. I have colleague named Taylor Fields who pastored in New York’s Lower East Side for over 25 years at little place called Graffiti Ministries. For the last quarter century, Taylor’s primary congregation has been the Lower East Side’s homeless population. They come to church and Bible study, they pray with one another, they serve each other in the food pantry and clothes closet, and they forgive each other when tempers flair or consuming addictions creep back into lives. It is what Taylor refers to as “loser-friendly Christianity.”

In one of his books chronicling his adventures as pastor to the homeless, he writes:

“I remember hearing a preacher talk once about an intense word study he was involved in concerning the word *Hallelujah*! Of course, literally we know *Hallelujah* means ‘praise God,’ but this man wanted to find a true equivalent in our own language and culture. After great pains and much research, he boiled down all of his studies to this one solitary phrase: ‘Hot dog, this is it!’”

“So,” he continues, “we at Graffiti began borrowing his contemporary phrase. No matter how hard or depressing the day turned, we would try to find one good thing that happened and shout, ‘Hot dog, this is it!’ As we saw the number of victories begin to outnumber the defeats, we would cheer, ‘Hot dog, this is it!’ We even began to shout it in the middle of church services. Sometimes, Victor, who spoke mostly Spanish, stood up in the middle of my sermon and shouted, ‘Hallelujah, this is a hot dog!’ The words weren’t exactly right, but we all knew what he meant.”

You see what I mean? We choose joy.

And we choose it by rejoicing in what we have already been given. “Those who wish to sing always find a song.”

Or as Victor might say, “Hallelujah, this is a hot dog!”

God knows what we mean.

Amen.