

## what joy what joy

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a reminder to me that complexity does not always equal profundity and that often the most direct and simple thoughts are the most profound. And the profound may have great impact on our lives ... if we will take the time and energy to ponder, reflect and implement the actions and behaviors indicated by the profound.

This letter is four short chapters that can be read in about fifteen and a half minutes. The outpouring of insight from that fifteen and a half minutes can (and often does) fill a lifetime of reflection.

There are several major themes running through the letter concurrently. I find it interesting to consider why this might be occurring and, to get some insight and clarity, it is helpful to think about our own communication styles with our friends as compared to distant acquaintances. When we are communicating with someone who does not know us very well, we often are more limited in expressing nuances of ideas and thoughts and tend to be more explicit. However, among our families, we can often communicate in shorthand.

I'll give an example. Last summer, we went on an Alaskan cruise with our extended family. Kathy's mother Kay invited all the kids and grandkids in the extended family on the cruise, and we had fifteen of us from Oklahoma and California on the trip. It turns out that when you are on the ship for a week with a thousand people, you get to know some of the folks as they participate in the shows or in comedy routines or on the dance floor in the "crow's nest." That's where we spent most late nights as a family dancing and having a great time. Well, a tall family having fun drew some attention and we became known and, even at ports of call, folks would come up and talk to us about how much they loved seeing our family enjoying each other, young and old. Whatever that recognition was, we ended up saying the Kipp family had become "cruise ship famous." If I were talking to you about your recognition factor in your neighborhood or company or in any social setting and I said to you "I bet you are cruise ship famous," that would probably mean little to nothing to you; it would sail right over your head. But I can guarantee that if I said "cruise ship famous" to my family, they would know exactly what I meant and have a whole range of emotional experience to go with that comment.

That is the context in which we find Paul writing to the Philippians. Much of this letter is in shorthand because he knows them well and seems to be encouraging them strongly to not deviate from what they have seen and learned and experienced.

So what are the major themes? Here is my list:

1. **Joy**
2. **Gospel** (also Good News)
3. **Fellowship** (also Unity; Partnership)
4. **Mentality** (also Think; Mind-set)

Many commentators will tell you that joy is *the* major theme of the letter. Part of the reason is the sheer predominance of the word “joy” and related words like “rejoice” and “gladness.” In one hundred and five verses in Philippians, some form of these words appears in fifteen of them. But word count alone does not make a theme. If I cataloged the speech of some folks I hear around town and determined the theme by word count, I might assume the most dominant theme in conversation is “like.” You’ve heard it: “And she was, like, what are you doing, and I was, like, nothing, like, how about you?”

What is the definition of joy? It is the “emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune.” Does that sound like Paul’s situation? He is in prison, probably in Rome. Other parts of the letter that we did not read this morning communicate his expectation that he will be released from prison and will return to see the church in Philippi again, but he is definitely not in a state of “well-being, success, or good fortune” from any worldly perspective.

Another definition of joy is the “prospect of possessing what one desires.” Now *that* sounds like Paul. In the verses leading up to our scripture reading this morning, Paul says he counts everything he has obtained in life as rubbish and sheer loss that is outweighed by knowing “Christ Jesus.” *“My one desire is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings in growing conformity with his death, in hope of somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead.”* (Philippians 3:10-11)

It seems clear that joy is present and is a theme that runs throughout the letter, but the joy is not the principal focal point, and if Paul seeks or if we seek joy as an end, I think we have gone down an unhelpful path. A quote I recently read says: “Stop chasing the wrong things ... and give the right things a chance to catch up with you.”

Chasing joy or happiness is the folly of chasing these desires as our goal. Joy and happiness are by-products of something else. What does Paul say about those who are focused on chasing these things? He says: *“As I have often told you, and now tell you with tears, there are many whose way of life makes them enemies of the cross of Christ. They are heading for destruction, they make appetite their god, they take pride in what should bring shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”* (Philippians 3:18-19)

I think the three other themes of Gospel, Fellowship and Mentality are the major themes and focus of the letter AND I think that these are the things that collectively have led Paul into joy, rejoicing and gladness ... and they can be the things that lead us into them as well, if we will let them.

The Gospel (Good News) is the engine and source of all of the ideas of how to think about life and death. I love how Paul does not pretend to have it all figured out when he says his goal is to “know Christ” *“in hope of somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead.”*

When Paul talks about the GOSPEL (translated “Good News”), it is not a conceptual thing for him. It is something he experienced on the Damascus Road and he was forever changed. If you do not know about Paul’s conversion experience, you can find the story in the ninth chapter of Acts. In keeping with our shorthand vernacular like “cruise ship famous,” if we tell another person we have had a “Damascus Road experience,” those three words can communicate a lot of information. Paul does not explain very much about the details of this Good News, but we get hints about what he has done in the past: *“To repeat what I have written to you before is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you”* (Philippians 3:1), so obviously he has written to the Philippians other times. In addition, he says at the end of our scripture passage this morning: *“Put into practice the lessons I taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do ....”* (Philippians 4:9)

FELLOWSHIP is also a theme that leads to the by-product of joy, and Paul talks about this throughout the letter by reminding of the ways he has partnered with the Philippians and they with him. They are the only church that provided financial support for Paul when he first set out from Macedonia (Philippians 4:15-16), and Paul indicates that while he appreciates the support, that is not his focus, and he says that God will supply the needs of the Philippians out of his riches in Christ Jesus.

All of those themes are present and important and worthy of reflection. But for now, I just want to focus a bit on the concept of MENTALITY as described by Paul. Throughout this letter, Paul talks about the inner life of feelings, thoughts and dispositions as precursor and encouragement to action and behavior. He talks about these on an individual level, both for himself and for others, and he talks about it on a community level. We read how this process is interwoven with the concept of joy earlier in the letter: *“If then our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any consolation of love, any participation in the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another and a common attitude of mind. Leave no room for selfish ambition and vanity, but humbly reckon others better than yourselves. Look to each other’s interests and not merely to your own.”* (Philippians 2:1-4)

When Paul talks about being of “one mind,” he does not mean we all agree with each other all the time. Clearly Paul is aware of differences of opinion and even dissention within the church at Philippi as well as outside influences that might divide the unity of the people. But for Paul, there is a gravitational center of immeasurable weight around which the church and people circle. And the gravitational center for Paul is Christ ... to know Christ ... to share in his suffering ... to have his mind set on heavenly things. He calls for the *ecclesia* of Philippi to set their minds on these things as well.

If we think of our solar system, we have planets that are very different and have very little in common. Venus is nothing like Jupiter, and none are anything like Earth. Yet all of the planets do circle around the same gravitational center: the Sun. Once captured by its gravitational pull, nothing is ever the same for the planets and they cannot escape the Sun’s pull. I would anthropomorphize this to say that if the planets had thoughts and feelings, they would not WANT to escape.

This analogy has applicability and plays out in Paul's life ... and our lives too, if we allow it. Paul was pulled into gravitational orbit around Jesus the Messiah on the Damascus Road. The Philippians were pulled into this gravitational orbit when they heard the Gospel. And we are pulled into this gravitational orbit around which we circle. In our world, if we think about how you are one planet and I am another and we have nothing in common, we are finding ways to remain apart and separate from each other. But if and when we focus on Jesus as our gravitational center, we have something profound in common, we work together in unity for the same purposes and goals, and our happiness cup or joy cup is filled.

In our lives collectively as this church faith family, what are some of these things upon which we can be of the same mind-set and thinking processes together that lead to joy?

We have quite a few of them these days, and I for one am feeling pretty joyful and excited as these "Spirit-centered" thoughts have manifest and yielded blessing in ways wonderful and even surprising. It is obvious to anyone paying attention that our refocus and rededication to the gravitational center of Christ has been led and facilitated and nurtured by Bruce Van Blair as the senior pastor of this faith family. I cannot help but hear Paul's voice from our scripture passage this morning and think of Bruce saying the same thing: *"Put into practice the lessons I taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do; and the God of peace will be with you."* Do we know how fortunate and blessed we are to have a pastor who holds so firm and so faithfully to the gravitational center of Christ? For a church, a faith family, an *ecclesia*, it is the difference between life and death.

So what are our "same mind" things around which we can share, rejoice and work toward?

It is the faithfulness of members who made it possible to purchase the contiguous property at 621 Heliotrope for the benefit of this church for generations to come.

It is last year's Prayer 101 Retreat led by Bruce and attended by twenty adults and thirteen youth ... yes, thirteen youth brought by Kathy Kipp. These thirty-three people were in attendance for a retreat that has changed and continues to change lives.

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It is Kathy's Youth Ministry class and confirmation of seventeen youth last month.

It is the Men's Retreat led by Jonathan Gamble helping us see our relationship with God in new and different ways.

It is the nine 12-Step groups that meet at the church saving lives every week for hundreds of people.

It is the capital improvement projects that have begun to ensure that the facility will be beautiful and inviting and continue to be an environment where we can meet to share in life together as Christ has called us.

It is the board and committee meetings each month where dozens and dozens meet and invest time and energy to ensure that the organizational structure of the church continues to operate and flourish.

It is the seven Disciple Bands that meet weekly to study scripture and share life and find ways to connect more deeply to Christ in ways that transform their lives, their families, their neighborhoods and their companies.

It is the work of the Vocatio Committee and the Board of Vocations working with people to find their call from God and to help them move into that call.

And it is Sunday mornings like this one, where we gather together ... in unity ... to love and serve and worship the God of all creation and Christ, the Messiah, and his Holy Spirit. When that is our focus ... when that is our gravitational center ... we stay true and on course and will not wobble or falter. That is our mind-set this morning as Christians.

So why does the title of this sermon have no punctuation? If you want to reflect on this morning, you can put the punctuation where you want.

We might say: What? Joy? What Joy?

Or: What Joy! What Joy!

Or: What joy? What Joy!

Find the source of your joy and claim it.

*“And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill your thoughts with these things.”*

Amen.