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Philippians 1:1-26
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Dungeon Joy

For the next six Sundays, we will be taking a joy ride through the book of Philippians. How do we cultivate joy when every moment is saturated with stress, anxiety, worry, or despair? We may say that we are joyful because we can see the light at the end of the tunnel of this pandemic, in two days the governor says that the only restriction is for unvaccinated people to wear masks. But this is a shallow joy. As shallow as the joy when our sports team wins the big game or we read a feel-good story in the newspaper. This morning I'm talking about the joy that Paul feels in prison. A joy felt with the full knowledge that Paul's lifeless body will be hanging on a cross next to Peter in a few short months because Nero blamed Christians when Rome burned down.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be a blessing to you, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

What is joy and how shall I describe it?

Perhaps we know joy when we feel it. When we see a friend or family member after a long time away. When we finally get that job we've been hoping for. When someone gives us a compliment or does something nice for us. Joy tends to come to us when good things happen to us when life is really going our way.

Perhaps we know joy from the dopamine rushing through our brain, the happiness neurotransmitter jumping the gap between our neurons because we've been on a long run or smoked something stimulating. Oftentimes, people say if we understand something and talk about it in scientific terms, it makes it less beautiful. But I disagree. I do not think that understanding that a rainbow is water-scattering photons makes the hues of a rainbow any less beautiful. And if joy is just chemicals in our brains, then joy is still beautiful, and I will go along thanking God for the chemicals.

But at the same time, this joy is fleeting. Speaking for myself, since one of the theories of depression is that it means that my dopamine breaks down faster than normal. So my feelings of joy may be rarer, smaller, and shorter-lasting than most people. But it's not just me, the joy of seeing family and the dopamine rush pass away with time and we won't always have reasons to be joyful. Activities of our youth that brought us joy may not be available to us in our mature age. Loved ones pass on into the arms of God. And a medical diagnosis can take away the future we thought we had. But still, I think that we should give joy a chance. I think we can still find reasons to be joyful.

What are the reasons for Paul's joy?

Paul begins his letter to the church in Phillipi with, "I thank my God 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. " Paul is imprisoned, he's going to Rome to face trial and I think we all know he does not expect to win the case. Paul's future of spreading the Gospel for many more decades is over, so how does he stay joyful?!

One way is through selflessness. Paul does not worry about his own death because he is laser-focused on his fledgling church of Phillipi's needs. I have not experienced this, but I hear people live vicariously through their kids, their triumphs are our triumphs, their struggles are our struggles. I've spent a year hearing about how your children are doing and it brings me joy to see your joy when they achieve something. And while we can take things too far and not let them go and live their own dreams, selflessness is one of the fruits of the spirit, it is a way of cheering on our fellow siblings of Christ. Selflessness is a way to give and receive joy from others so that people can carry us when the burdens of life become too hard to carry.

Paul says, I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel. so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. All that Paul does is for his flock. I cannot keep myself from worrying about COVID numbers or snowpack in the mountains, or racism. It is important to worry about what you can change and what you can do in your life. Be that showing up for a friend, marching in Pride, or making a good meal for yourself or others. And I think Paul would agree, his heart bleeds for others, he cares about when they face persecution even though he knows he can do little about it. And I think too that our hearts should bleed the red blood of compassion.

What are the reasons for Paul's joy?

The centerline that I see when I read Paul is his concern for others being a beacon for his life. Paul is able to be joyful because he is not focusing on himself, but instead is focusing on his loved ones. Their joys and his joys. Their struggles through trying to build a community together are his struggles. Philippians is often called a letter of joy, but this is because it is a letter of Paul's limitless love that he feels for his flock in Phillipi. And his love will outlive his life, just like the love of God also did not die on a Roman Cross, Christ's life giving blood was shared with many so that it would not disappear from this world forever.

I think one lesson we can get from this scripture is the power of spreading our joy out to the whole community. A sort of putting our eggs in the largest basket. If we think only of ourselves then when life sends us to a roman prison, we will lose hope. But when we hang our hopes and joys on the whole community there will always be a reason for joy. Not so much that we live vicariously through others, but so that we can all hold space when joy is absent and rise together when one of our number experiences joy anew.

By the power of the Holy Spirit may it be so. Amen.