



Philippians: Official Guide for a Joy-filled Life

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin a new series on the letter to the Philippians from Paul, entitled *Philippians: Official Guide for a Joy-filled Life*. This sermon series is coming at an important time and I wonder if any of you out there agree. I am struggling to find joy. This year has taken us on a rollercoaster, and it seems like we can't get off this ride. The events of this year have sucked a lot of joy out of us and filled the space with hopelessness, apathy, fear and doubt. So maybe, you're like me? Maybe you're looking for joy, seeking some relief. And this letter from Paul is a good place to start. You see this letter is all about joy. Paul uses the word joy or rejoicing 16 times in the book of Philippians. Joy is a theme that runs throughout his message for his friends in Philippi. Why? Because the Philippians are searching for joy as well.

The church in Philippi was facing several struggles. You might say they were on a rollercoaster as well, though a different kind of one. The Philippians were facing persecution from the Roman government; they were facing conflict and disunity. They were also anxious about what was happening in Paul's life. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. And so, Paul seeks to address their situation, to encourage them, to express his joy for them.

This letter is also about relationships and the joy that comes out of them. This letter is based upon Paul's relationship with this church in Philippi. This was the first church that Paul established in Europe, and so, Paul was proud of these folks. He was like a proud parent, who knows he raised his kids right. The Philippians were also a special group of people, who supported Paul in this difficult time in his ministry while he sat in prison. The Philippians had sent Paul a gift and this letter was a thank you note, Paul's opportunity to express his joy for their generosity.

This letter is also about the Philippians' relationships with one another. And we see that in our reading for today. Paul writes: "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel..." Here, Paul is speaking to their life together as a community. There was some conflict going on; we all know that community isn't perfect. Paul knew that there was some disunity there, particularly between two members of the Philippian church. Later, in this letter, Paul will

address this conflict directly. But for now, Paul encourages unity among all members because joy grows out of community. Joy is created when we are in relationship with one another.

First, Paul says, “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” What does that mean? He means that everything we do, say, and be as a community should point others to Christ. Our life as a community should tell others about Jesus. When people see us, they should see Jesus. Our lives should proclaim the gospel everywhere we go to everyone we meet. The gospel should bring us joy, right? The gospel has proclaimed that we are free, that we are loved by God. Joy grows out of our gospel proclamation. Think about it? When we do good, we feel good. Joy begets joy. And so, in these moments, when we seek joy, perhaps, God is calling us to create joy in the lives of others? How might you proclaim the gospel and share joy today?

Next, Paul says, “stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side.” Paul is encouraging the Philippians to stand alongside one another. In the Greek, the words used here are meant to depict a military image. Now I have never served in the armed forces of the United States, but I do know that there is a kinship that builds between those that serve alongside one another. Paul is encouraging that kind of relationship, a relationship built on trust and respect.

In my mind, I imagine our community as if it were on a long journey together. We are walking beside one another. And so, we are accompanying one another on our lives’ journeys. When we accompany each other, we walk beside one another, walking in step with each other, at the same pace. When we strive side by side, we know there is a person there if we fall. We know there is a person there when we need them. That is the community we all strive for. Think of when a member of our congregation loses a family member, we as a community surround that person with love and prayers. We walk alongside that person in their grief. We strive side by side. Where else might you see folks striving side by side at Trinity?

Friends, in this season, we are surrounded by a lot things that are trying to take joy away from us. And just as Paul encouraged the Philippians to find joy in one another and through the sharing of the gospel, I am doing the same. Over the last 6 months, I have heard about the ways you are proclaiming God’s good news in your lives through acts of community service by caring for those in need and acts of justice and advocacy for the marginalized and oppressed. I am encouraged by your commitment to the gospel of Christ. Over the last 6 months, I have seen this community strive together and support one another, and I am encouraged by your love for one another.

And though there may be many things that try to divide us, I pray that we are reminded of what unites us, the love of God in Christ Jesus. God’s love is stronger than any else and I find hope in that. I pray that we might be a community that proclaims gospel in word and deed. I pray that we might be a community that strives together and creates joy in our relationships with one another. I pray that we might have joy in our faith, confident in God’s love for us.

Amen.