

**Joy**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Mary Koon**  
**February 19, 2023**  
**Philippians 4: 4–9 (NRSV)**

Today we turn to Paul’s letter to the Philippians – a church of primarily gentile believers in Macedonia – the very first church in Europe. The church was a generous one and offered financial support to Paul and his missions. It was founded in opposition to the Roman culture in the city, and, like any community, there were some disagreements between members of the fold. Paul’s letter encouraged the people to have faith in Jesus in the face of challenges and used himself as a model of courage.

Listen to how God may be speaking to you through Philippians 4: 4–9:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. AMEN

People of God, we were created for joy.

As you know, since January, we have explored the values that Oak Grove lives into and aspires to as defined by our discernment conversations last fall. We've explored authenticity, compassion and inclusion, deep relationship, justice, and humble curiosity. Today we'll talk about "Celebratory Joyfulness."

We are a people of good news, and that news is meant to be shared. In community we uplift one another, celebrate birthdays and anniversaries and all that life brings - together. Like all our values, our joy is unmistakable both within and outside the walls of our church.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is just full of joy, which is evident from the first few verses. And these are not trite, Pollyanna "feel good" sentiments. They aren't sentimental at all. Paul did not compose the letter from a cushy hotel room on the Amalfi coast, nor was he just having a good day. The words did not spring from a life of ease and comfort as someone who did not know sorrow or suffering. We can take these words to heart, as Paul writes from prison, where he is being held on capital crimes and awaiting his fate. He has been beaten, threatened, and even lived through a shipwreck. Paul has a violent past, and from the time of his conversion, he endured some sort of ailment, a "thorn in his side," that God did not heal. It is thought that he lived with chronic pain.

And yet, despite all of this, Paul urges the church to rejoice. To be gentle with one another. Not to give in to worry but give thanks and to pray together.

Rejoicing isn't always easy, is it? It isn't realistic for anyone to be happy all the time. In fact, joy and happiness are not the same. Happiness is a reaction of something outside of us, a happening, but joy comes from the

inside. Joy is a spiritual posture, an orientation of our souls. It is a practice that both acknowledges reality, the suffering, the injustice in the world, and also recognizes and gives thanks for God's presence and peace within it. I think we humans sometimes get happiness and joy all mixed up. We think that happiness will bring joy, so we go for that. But happiness is temporary, and joy is something more, joy comes from God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of this tendency we have to seek joy by looking for things that will make us happy. She says, "I do not have a million dollars, nor any plausible way of coming up with a million dollars, I seek happiness with smaller treasures instead: really nice clothes, for instance, a set of copper bottomed All Clad cookware, and most recently, a Parker Duofold fountain pen with an 18-karat gold nib. Contrary to much of my religious education, these things really do make me happy. I enjoy wearing them, handling them, seeing and using them, but the truth is that they are all dismal failures at bringing me true joy."

"When I wake up in the middle of the night and cannot go back to sleep for all of the fears that are taking turns sitting on my chest, it never occurs to me to get up and bring my 13-inch frying pan into bed with me. Like most everything else that brings me happiness, that is a daytime comfort, not a nighttime one. In the middle of the night, with the sound of my doomed heart banging in my ears, there is no getting around the fact that most of the things that I think bring me joy really cause me to feel incomplete. And I realize my only safe investment turns out to be whether or not I abide in God." (3 Taylor, Barbara Brown. "Treasure Hunt: Luke 12:13–21." *Review & Expositor* 99 no 1 Wint 2002, p 97-104.

<https://www.westsideccdoc.org/pdffiles/sermons/2009/Complete-Joy-051709.pdf>)

It strikes me as remarkable, beautiful, and tender, that Jesus speaks of joy at the last Supper. He knew the suffering that was to come, both to himself and to his dearest disciples. With this knowledge close, Jesus shares from his heart. After washing their feet, he tells the disciples all that he wants them to know, the nitty gritty, that they are loved, that they are a part of him, that they are to share that love and serve others. To do as he has done. And Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” John 15: 11

When I think of Oak Grove, I think of a place that is always striving to listen to the Spirit and follow where it leads. We do not shy from the truth of our lives or the truth of the state our world. And, indeed, we fall short, we mess up, we hurt one another, we hurt the earth.

We can hold more than one truth. We can recognize that the world we currently live in is beautiful and brutal.

There is sorrow, loss, illness, war, violence, AND, we know that God is here, with us, with the world, always renewing it. Jesus, through his life, teaching, death and resurrection, offers us a vision of what the world could be. One where the earth and people flourish and justice reigns.

If we are to do the long, involved work of justice making, we must be persistent in prayer and thanksgiving, and maintain a posture and openness to receive joy.

The author and theologian Debie Thomas writes, “It’s clear that Paul’s famous lines in Philippians are not about feeling good so much as they are about cultivating the inner life of the soul. In Paul's view, peace and joy are not emotions we can conjure up within ourselves. They come from God, and the only way we can receive them is through consistent spiritual practice: prayer, supplication, gentleness, and contemplation.”

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3246-rejoice-always>

Each week, we join together in person and online. A gathering of vulnerable, perfectly imperfect people who journey together.

We join our hearts to give thanks to God, to remind ourselves of God's goodness and revel in God's presence. We listen for that still small voice of God. We sing hymns of praise. We set aside time to learn and reflect on what is true, and honorable, just, and good. We declare that God is for us, and for the world, too. We lift up those who are low, and sit with those who weep, we throw a party when it's time to celebrate, too. We allow ourselves to hurt for the things that hurt God. And then we go into our lives and into our communities and share our joy, our hearts, our service.

Sarajane spoke beautifully about her experience of communion in February. She shared that while she was receiving bread and juice in the choir, she saw the care and warmth of those around her, helping one another, sharing smiles and laughter. And then she looked out and witnessed the rest of our gathering sharing Christ's meal, person by person, each precious. She was utterly overwhelmed with a peace that was beyond her understanding. A peace that felt a lot like joy and love and true shalom.

I hope that you have a story, too. A time that you felt joy, a lightness bubbling up, or a strong sense of inner peace among those in this place. Think for a moment, and then turn to the person next to you and share one of those moments. I'd like you to have a chance to tell someone your joy, too. If you are online, please write something in the comments, please. Ready? I'll give you a minute or two.

Anyone want to share? (From the congregation: stories about people who felt welcome here after not feeling welcome at other churches; being back in person after Covid and illness; seeing eagles fly above

worship when we worshipped outdoors last year; Green team initiatives of solar panels, etc.)

Thank you!

Friends, Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, those weeks that lead up to Easter. Lent is a time of prayer and fasting, of being completely honest and vulnerable with ourselves and God. Lent is about the inner work of the soul. As we begin this season, let us do so with a commitment to abide in Christ, as Christ abides in us, and to lean into joy whenever it finds us.

May it be so.

Amen