Together We Worship

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Mary Koon

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Philippians 4: 1–9 (NRSV)

Today we will reflect on some of the Apostle Paul's most familiar and poetic words found in his letter to the Philippians. The book of Philippians is a letter written to the young church at Philippi, a church that is near and dear to Paul's heart. Unlike some of his other letters, Paul does not write to address a grievance or chide them for disunity or poor behavior, but instead, to offer support and encouragement to persist in the faith and live the teachings of Jesus even when life is really hard. And it was difficult for the early church, who was made up of mostly poor and disenfranchised people. There was opposition to the church.

The letter to the Philippians was all about joy. And Paul wrote from jail! Imagine reflecting on joy when you are incarcerated.

We, too, live in challenging times, uniquely so, and joy seems to be in short supply these days.

Yet joy, unlike happiness, doesn't depend on what's happening in the world. Rather, joy springs from a deep spiritual well, and has to do with the Divine sense of peace and nearness. Joy is from God, and God is the constant presence in our lives in spite of, in the midst of, what happens. Like me, perhaps you have felt an inexplicable sense of joy in the midst of grief, confusion, or working with others on an a seemingly intractable problem.

It is in Christ that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). In Christ where there is true freedom and joy. Jesus himself says, in the

gospel of John at the last supper, “I tell you these things that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

Following Jesus’ example, we do not deny what is wrong in the world, or somehow push it away, but rather bear witness to the injustice and suffering, even while joining together with God and one another, to transform this world. To proclaim the good news.

Paul writes intimately and tenderly.

Philippians 4: 1–9

> [1]Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.
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> [2]I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. [3]Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.
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> [4]Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5]Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. [6]Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7]And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
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> [8]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. [9]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.

Today I want to talk about worship, specifically what we do when we gather on Sundays and other times.

I was touched by Karen's words last week during her faith talk, describing the beautiful memories she holds of worshipping with her family as a child. I am fortunate, too, to hold meaningful memories of the church where I was formed in faith. My dad and I would always drive together first, because my mother and brothers were a little slower to get ready and we didn't want to be late for the service. As a young mom, worship on Sunday mornings was important, and we would pack up our four children, bring them to the 8 am service and plop them in the front row. Our pastor Ken would look at us and say, "You all look like a million bucks this morning... because that's what it is going to cost to raise all those kids!" The real challenge was keeping our children separated during the service so they didn't argue and poke each other. But it felt worth it.

Friends, the foundation of our life together as the church of Jesus Christ is worship. We affirm that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the gifts of Word and Sacrament, Jesus is present and active among us. (PCUSA Book Of Order, W 1: 0106) Though we can worship at any time and in any place, because God is the Lord of time and space, as is our Christian tradition, we worship as a community on Sunday mornings, each one like a little Easter.

As gathered people, we affirm, through word and sacrament, what it is we value and hold dear. In worship, we affirm that God is worthy of praise, and we sing and pray to God's glory. (In other words, we rejoice!) Worship is a place we can hold one another up when someone is grieving, feeling sad or alone, because we all belong. In worship, we celebrate God's goodness and new life, like singing happy birthday, or

joyfully welcoming new members into this community, knowing that we are a living organism that will stretch and grow because of them.

When we gather at Oak Grove to worship each week, we join together to enact a basic order of spoken prayers, music and scripture reading. This is called liturgy, a word that in Latin means “the work of the people.”

Worship isn’t a performance, you are not an audience, and we on the chancel are not actors. We all participate in worship together. Of course, there are those whose service makes this all come together: musicians, sound, light, and video, giving people at home or traveling an opportunity to worship with the Body, greeters, ushers, coffee makers, acolytes, and so on. It’s even bigger - everyone in the pews and those worshipping online are active participants.

Because what we do here – together – helps shape and form our lives outside these walls throughout the week. Worship helps order our priorities. Think about it. it is here that we thank God for God’s love and grace, we confess our fears and failings, seek and accept forgiveness, we offer words of peace and love for one another, we welcome the stranger as a friend, we pray for each other, we explore Holy Scripture and learn about Jesus. We give generously. offerings of thanksgiving, praise, and treasure. We sing and breathe together. Each month we gather around the communion table and feast with each other, anticipating a time when the table will be wide and inclusive enough for every person and generation. Not only that, when we have the opportunity, we gather around a family and a person, sometimes a baby, sometimes a child, and sometimes an adult, and baptize that beloved one in the name of the triune God, sharing ancient words of acceptance and love. Each week, every baptism, every liturgy, we proclaim that God is love, a love that cannot be earned and cannot be lost and that WE are called to be the conduit of that love.

That's a lot in 60 minutes or so.

When we leave this place, we are offered a blessing and charge, to go into this broken and beautiful world and live lives of faithful witness, serving God by serving our neighbors. Because we worship a God of service.

This is our work, the work that we are all called and equipped to do. And it is joyful and meaningful and challenging work.

So, when we come to worship, we practice all the welcoming, belonging, forgiving, confessing, praying, praising and go back to our lives and live it out. Imperfectly, of course, because we are human. But we return each week to be reminded of God's enormous grace. It is a like a holy rhythm. A sacred spiral.

We know that we live in a consumer-oriented world. Oak Grove, like lots of other churches, welcome those who are "church shopping," just checking us out and that is understandable and necessary. I wish that there were another way of describing what's really happening. While it's true that worship nourishes and sustains us, and we absolutely received spiritual sustenance when we worship, it is not a commodity. Like shopping for something you can purchase and use. Something just for ourselves. It feels true to me that rather than seeing church as something to consume, people are really searching for a place where they can participate and belong. Where worship and ministry resonate with them and they can allow themselves to love and be loved, to be vulnerable and dig into "work of the people."

When youth are in confirmation, and deciding whether to accept the vows their parents made on their behalf at baptism, we talk about the Yes of it all, making a decision to say Yes to Jesus, Yes to worship and service and doing life with these people in this place.

On a profound level, week after week, worship invites us to embody, that is, make real and human, the ongoing story of the redemptive hope, justice, mercy, and love that we see in Jesus Christ.

As I think of that, I am compelled by Paul's words. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, he writes, 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.

There are weeks when it is hard to know what is true, or bear witness to much that is pleasing. Or to find justice in the world and that which can be commended. As the gathered Body of Christ, worship reminds us of who we are and to whom we belong. We can bring our honest selves here, whether we are feeling energized or exhausted, inspired or discouraged, the whole of the human experience. Nothing is prescribed; we show up just as we are and together, we are Christ's Body.

And for an hour, one hour out of 168 in the week, we step away from the frantic pace of modern life, to focus together on the One who creates and redeems and sustains, who by grace, promises to meet us here. Not because God demands it or needs it or for God's benefit, but because worship is a gift and it is good for us. That is powerful!

Faithful stewardship is about caring for all that God has entrusted us with our time, our talents, our service, our gifts, our community, our earth. It is about the whole of our lives.

I want to share a little story of this gentleness, faith, and joy as it relates to the sacred spiral of worship. After a very public demonstration of hatred and threat to our Muslim neighbors this week, on Friday, several members of Oak Grove joined with other Bloomington residents to show up at Dar Al Farooq at noon. They gathered outside the entrance of the

mosque to support these neighbors and bear witness to God's love and care. They offered warm smiles and signs of peace to scores of people arriving for midday prayer and worship. They were greeted enthusiastically by our Muslim neighbors, who simply want to live and worship in peace.

In this place we proclaim God's extravagant love for this world and then we take that love to our homes, our streets, our schools, our capital. So, let us rejoice in the Lord. For God's steadfast love endures forever.

I pray that our lives will continue to be grounded by the gift of worship, shaped by God in community, who calls and claims us to be co-creators of a world that is just, merciful and filled with hope.

May it be so.

AMEN