

September 12, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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Philippians 4:1-9 + John 15:9-17

Paul, Timothy and Barnebas made many journeys, travelling throughout the ancient world, on a mission to present the good news of Jesus. Yet, it seems that the community of Christians that they founded at Philippi are some of Paul's favorites. Unlike at Corinth, the Philippians seemed to pick up what Paul was teaching them, and running with it along the same lines that Paul thought it should go. But, they had their disagreements, to – and Paul uses those disagreements to help build up unity and love in the church.

In writing the closing to his famous letter to the church at Philippi, Paul calls two women of the church – Euodia and Syntyche “co-athletes” in the ministry of the Gospel. Most of our versions today say “struggle together” but the Greek word that Paul uses is *synathlein* – *athlein* being a form of *athletes*, meaning those who contest for a prize. By calling Euodia and Syntyche “co-athletes,” Paul establishes a lot in a short writing – he's saying that all three of them are on the same team, working together for a common goal. And by lifting up women in particular, he's setting the conventional wisdom on its head – after all, athletes of the ancient world were only men. Paul is leaning hard into the same idea that he explicitly wrote to the church at Galatia – “In Christ, there is no male or female.”

He's also very clever in naming these two women specifically as co-athletes. Their names have an allegoric meaning that would have been hard for Greek-speakers to miss. Euodia's name is “Good Path” – *eu hodia*, the same root as *ex hodos*, from the path. Syntyche is similarly two parts – *syn*, (together) and *Tyche*, fortune, or “with fortune, luck, or grace.” With all of this together, Paul is saying that if you team up with GoodPath and Grace, “letting your gentleness show in your treatment of all people,” then you will “rejoice always!”

Rejoice always? How can we possibly do so? Well, we've said it many times, but it bears repeating – joy is not a feeling of happiness, but rather the awareness of fulfillment at our core. As Paul Tillich puts it, “This fulfillment is only possible if we

unite ourselves with what others really are. Joy is more than pleasure, more than happiness... Even in an unhappy state, a great joy can transform unhappiness into happiness.” Joy is awareness of the fulfillment at your core – and for Paul the Apostle, that fulfillment at your core is Christ’s presence with you.

Let me give you an example of “awareness of fulfillment.” This week, Pastor Elana and I went on a hike at Thunderbird Lake, near Norman, Oklahoma. It was a beautiful walk through the woods, an excellent time to be out in nature. Except that, unbeknownst to us, nature decided to hike back with us, in the form of tiny little insects that swarmed through the gaps in our shoes and socks, and left a series of extremely itchy bites as a memento of their travels. You are never more aware of your feet than when they start to itch constantly, and that itch seems to never be quenched, since scratching it only makes it itch more stridently later. That itchiness is a lot like the heart of people who know God at a distance. Sure, reading a bit of philosophy, doing a bit of charity can help ease it for a moment, but it comes back stronger next time. But when you have a deep connection to God, when the Holy Spirit is with you, you have an awareness of peace and joy at your core that is like that itch is finally satiated. Then, doing things for others isn't just for making yourself feel better, but a sharing of the love that God has brought you.

That’s what Christ promises in John’s Gospel, during his farewell with the disciples. “I have told you these things that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete.” Joy isn’t a fleeting moment of happiness or pleasure, but a deep and abiding relationship with the Divine and with others. Because we all have a deep desire for this relationship with God and each other, it truly is possible to rejoice always, being aware of the depth of God’s love for us. As Jesus goes on to say, “Love each other just as I have loved you.” Love is this deep joy expressed in the world, and love flows naturally into joy, and joy back into love. Love, too, is not just a warming of the heart, but an outpouring of care for others, secure in the knowledge that you are also loved and cared for.

If we flip back to Paul for a moment, he tells us that we shouldn’t be anxious, but bring our requests to God along with our thanks. Then the peace of God will

keep our hearts and minds safe in Jesus, allowing us to focus on truth, holiness, justice, purity, beauty, and praiseworthiness. This is the good path of the good news – the relief of joy, aware that our core is safe in God’s loving hands. Even when terrible things happen, God’s love holds us tightly. And Jesus tells us that we didn’t need to do anything to earn this – instead, Jesus calls us friends, having chosen us all.

Through Christ’s grace, we are also co-athletes with Paul and Timothy, Euodia and Syntyche. We are able to come to an agreement in the Lord – to recognize, with joy, that we are greater than our differences because of Christ’s presence in each of us. We have the security of God’s love with us, knowing that we are free to follow in our callings, even if that turns the world on its head. And through it all, we can focus on the things that really matter, the good path of Christ, and the grace of God.

May you be on the right road with God. May the love of Christ fill you with joy – fulfilling your core-self. May the Spirit of God be with you always, prompting you to actively love everyone you meet and have ever known. Amen.