

Joy is life in Excess!

Introduction Let us pray:

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray
and to concentrate my thoughts on you:
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness,
But with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways,
but you know the way for me...
Restore me to liberty,
and enable me to live now
That I may answer before you and before me.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
your name be praised.

This is **A Prayer written by Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer** that expresses deep faith and joy; and when we realize that he prayed this in a concentration camp shortly before he was hung on the gallows; we are humbled by how joy seems to erupt in the most difficult times. Meister Eckhart said in the 14th century: *“What is this joy that even death cannot destroy...how can I find it!”* I wonder if this joy doesn't simply find us.

Indwelling: I had the opportunity to help a young family in a huge way with your support! They came because one of you suggested to them that your church would help. So when she called, she said: “A man from your church told me to come to you and said ‘our congregation responds to those in need.’ He said Covenant is a community of faith that talks about helping and actually follows through!” Whoever you maybe, thank you for your witness and Faith in Action. It was a young family who just need a little bit of support to make it, facing huge obstacles. In that moment I experienced joy! Sometimes joy erupts in interesting places doesn't it? It found me in the eyes of a young pregnant woman.

Speaking of Joy - Philippians captured my imagination this week. Actually I ended up reading the entire book of Philippians out of Eugene Peterson's version called *The Message*. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is soaringly beautiful! It simply lifts your spirits with an elegant love letter to a church for which he obviously cares deeply. I exchanged our version for the one from the Message for this week and found in the introduction these words: *“Paul's happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious.”* But here's the irony underneath that claim: *Paul is writing this letter from prison,*

as he faces death for preaching the gospel, for disrupting the empire and its values. He's not writing it on an especially good day, when things are going well and he's surrounded by friends. No, he writes from an even deeper joy, springing from his knowledge of and relationship with, Jesus Christ. This is the source of Paul's joy, and ours, too: "Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this 'spilling out' quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person" (*The Message* page 2135). I love the definition that, "Joy is life in excess." What an interesting way to describe joy! Paul, like any joyful person, does seem to overflow with a powerful need to share what he has. Isn't that what generosity, and evangelism, and warm hospitality are about - sharing an overflowing joy, "life in excess"? In another part of Philippians we hear: "Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life" (*The Message*). What is at the center of your life? Ironically, the beautiful love letter for today begins with Paul trying to resolve a church fight. Two women, esteemed church leaders and workers, need to resolve their differences. It would be interesting to hear Pastor Jerry Tews our consultant with "Healthy Congregations" talk about conflict resolution around Paul's refrain to "be of the same mind in the Lord." That brief reference leaves us hungry for more information, and more help, in painful church conflicts and personal relationships what does it mean "to be of the same mind in the Lord."

Imitation: When he was inaugurated as U.S. president in January 1961, John Kennedy famously challenged Americans saying, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Less than two months later, he established one way for Americans to do that when he signed an order setting up the Peace Corps. JFK's idea was to get thousands of people who were not professional diplomats, not career adventurers, but just ordinary people with perhaps a particular skill set (agriculture, engineering, teaching, etc.) and fan out into the world to help people. The Peace Corps, which has its 50th anniversary this year, continues to give us opportunities to serve our country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. In the half century since its founding, more than 200,000 Americans have joined the Peace Corps, serving in 139 countries and making a difference every day with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion. Why is this important to me...well, my nephew Nathan Petersen just began in Rwanda which is in East Central Africa. He is living with a host family of five. The mother is a farmer and the father is a carpenter and they have three children. They live in the capital Kigali. He is struggling to learn the language, adapt to a new diet, living on the edges of extreme poverty and teaching families English. There are 37 people serving in Rwanda

and with Nate & others are living with host families. Amidst the challenges *he is finding joy in the Peace Corp* helping people build better lives for themselves. His work in this part of the world represents a legacy of service that has become a significant part of our country's history and positive image abroad. Maybe we could refrain from Kennedy's challenge like this -- "Ask not what Covenant Lutheran can do for you; ask what you can do for Covenant" -- "Ask not what Stoughton Community/Wisconsin can do for you; ask what you can do for Stoughton/Wisconsin" how does this reflect your call to serve God?

Serving in the Peace Corp of God, in what way is your (pick one) workplace, home or community a place where you can make a difference every day with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion? Sometimes it is amazing where we can find joy! Nate's life journey along with the Apostle Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer is spilling out from me to you on this Saturday/Sunday.

There is hope for us for if Paul can write and act out in such a way from prison; if Dietrich Bonhoeffer can pray with such elegance prior to death, or Nate can experience joy with so little; imagine what each of us can accomplish in the places we need healing, places of confusion, times of discouragement because like all of the others we follow Jesus too! And our healing service for today is just another reminder that whatever you face you do not face it alone and the God of peace is guiding your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. "Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life"; joy finds us amidst life in excess!

Immediacy: Yad Vashem is the name of the Holocaust Museum and Memorial in Jerusalem. The first thing visitors see at Yad Vashem is the Street of Righteous Gentiles, a long boulevard of trees, each planted to honor a Gentile who risked his/her life to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Next is the Children's Memorial. Over the entrance, there are large stone candles of varying lengths, each snuffed out prematurely. We walked through a tunnel representing the entrance to the gas chambers through which 2 million children passed to their executions...Inside, in a large, dark room, candles flickered, reflected over and over in mirrors; soft recorded voices quietly recited names, ages and towns of the little ones. 'Janina Kuzma, age 14, Warsaw, Madia Novak, age 3' But even in these death camps, the soul would not be squashed. Some drew pictures, others wrote poetry, others sculpted, and still others expressed their creativity in inventive ways. Even on the walls of the camp, where many of the children were executed, liberating allied forces found children's drawings of flowers and butterflies. It is amazing where joy finds God's people!

In the End: Every Friday morning I pray with a few men from our congregation and one of those is Norm Toso. And he always begins “God of Glory, God of love...” and I always want to respond “hearts unfold like flowers above!” It comes from of the first verse of “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.” Let me close with the last verse of that wonderful hymn: “Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest, well-spring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest! Thou our Father, Christ our brother, all who live in love are thine; teach us how to love each other, lift us to *the joy divine!*” With Christ my friends, joy is life in excess - no matter where you are! Amen.

Philippians 4

¹ My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God.

Pray About Everything

²I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn't want his children holding grudges.

³And, oh, yes, Syzygus, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them. These women worked for the Message hand in hand with Clement and me, and with the other veterans—worked as hard as any of us. Remember, their names are also in the Book of Life.

⁴⁻⁵Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

⁶⁻⁷Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

⁸⁻⁹Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. (The Message)