

Philippians 4:4-9
“Worth Doing Twice”

Rev. David Pierce
March 22, 2020

I wonder if you can guess where Paul is this morning in writing this letter to the church at Philippi. “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice.”

Have you ever had an experience that was so good that you just had to go back and do it again right away; like once isn't enough? A couple years ago, Moira, the kids, and I were at Disney World standing in line to go on Splash Mountain when it started to pour. When the thunder and lightning came on, they had to shut the ride down. 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes, peoples started to get out of line. “We're going to go find something else to do.” 30 minutes, 45 minutes, more people got out of line. But we decided to stick it out. We figured if we could ever get on the ride, we were going to get wet anyway. Plus, if we ever did get on the ride, we'd be first up. Everyone else was on Space Mountain now. After an hour, the rain stopped and sure enough, not only were we the front of the line, we were the whole line. When we got off the ride, we noticed there was still no line. We all looked at each other and said in unison, “Again, let's go again.”

Rejoice. Again I will say, rejoice.

Some things are worth repeating. Can you guess where Paul is this morning? You may be as surprised to discover where he is as to discover where he is not. He is not on Splash Mountain, or Space Mountain. He is in prison. Again I say, he is in prison. Talk about isolation and quarantine. Talk about losing most of your protections. Talk about not being let out to play whenever you want to anymore.

But this is not why I bring up Paul to us this morning. I do not bring him up because I hope we will see something of our own story in his story, because I think we who are practicing social distancing and quarantine, and who feel some of our own protections slipping away, can somehow relate to what it is like to be in prison. In fact, I would caution us against trying to relate, in trying to make comparisons these days. Comparisons have their time

and place, but the problem is they can also cause us to become disregarding and dismissive of the fear, pain, and suffering of others.

For the past 3 weeks, I've been taking a Continuing Education course through our local United Church of Christ conference on Racial Justice and White Privilege. On the first day of the course, we were asked to go around the room and share something we were hoping to get out of taking the class. My response was to say that I was hoping to be able to find a way to better relate to those whose experiences are different from my own. To find something within my own humanity that could serve as a touch point for what it feels like to be a victim of racial discrimination. My intended goal was compassion and sympathy for others. But for as innocent and wholesome as I believed this was, when I finished speaking, the person sitting next to me at the table—a black man—said simply, “Don't do that.”

“Don't do what?” I said.

“Don't try to figure out what it must be like to be me. You're white, and just because you might also be short and didn't get picked for the basketball team when you were in high school, doesn't mean you can possibly understand what it's like to walk around in black skin.”

“What's left then,” I asked him. “What's the way to common ground?”

And that's when he gave me what has become one of the most powerful pieces of advice I've ever received: “To witness and testify.” To not say when you see some grave injustice, or some terrible bigotry, “Well, I know how you feel, let me tell you about this time I...” but rather to say, “I see you where you are. I've never been in your shoes. Tell me what it's like.” And when we see a pain too great to explain or to hold, not to say, “Well, you think you've got it bad, let me tell you about this time I...” but rather to say, “This must be so hard for you. I don't understand it. Can you help me out?” Because often times, the tendency when dealing with a reality different from our own is either to deflect attention away from it by downplaying it—by acting like it's not that big a deal, we've all been there before—or

to exaggerate things by acting like no one has it worse than we do. Either way, we run the risk of disregarding and dismissing the journey another person has had to take, and the only story they have to tell. Instead, try to do what the Jesuits do: to seek a compassion that stands in awe at what people have to carry, and not in judgement at how they carry it.

Paul is in prison this morning. Whether you feel he's better or worse off than you, I'll let you decide. At the very least, it should be noted that he's not in isolation and quarantine because of the Coronavirus. He is there on account of his preaching of the gospel. For going around preaching that the nations are but a drop in the bucket and there is a God whose power is greater than the most super-power power on earth; for proclaiming the poor and disenfranchised ought to have the same, if not more, access to the wealth of the earth as the rich do; for not being afraid to speak out against the idolatry of fame and fortune; for declaring there is coming a day when mercy, and not might, will rule the land, Paul is in prison. He is in isolation and quarantine. He is alone, but he is not lonely. He must be afraid and anxious, for he is human, but he talks like someone who knows fear is not the enemy; paralysis, despair, indifference is. He is largely unprotected, with few good cards left in his possession to play, save one: joy.

Rejoice. Again I will say, rejoice.

For Paul, our ability to rejoice is the one thing no one can ever take away from us, because at the end of the day, it is not dependent upon our circumstances or surroundings. Paul was in prison, probably nearing the end of his life. When he says rejoice, he is not ignoring this. He is not sticking his head in the clouds, looking for pie in the sky. It would be easy to accuse Paul of being a romantic who only sees what he wants to see. "Rejoice! Just keep rejoicing. No, no, don't look over there. Over here, stay on the sunny side of the street and all will be fine."

When I think of Paul, though, I hear a tired voice. I see a man who is reaching deep into the recesses of his heart and mind in search of something to grab on to. What he finds there is something—someone—already reaching back to grab hold of him. It is the gentle love of

God in Christ. Paul realizes he is not alone, he has never been alone. This love has been within him the whole time. It is enough to make him say not once, but twice: rejoice. Again I will say, rejoice.

There are so many ways to reach out with joy to our tired world today. I think Paul and God would have us know, however, that we don't need to reach very far, or try too hard. I'll leave you today with a short paragraph from the final chapter of Margaret Renkl's new book: "*Late Migrations*." The chapter is titled, "*Holy, Holy, Holy*."

On the morning after my mother's sudden death, before I was up, someone brought a basket of muffins, good coffee beans, and a bottle of cream—real cream, unwhipped—left them at the back door, and tiptoed away. I couldn't eat. The smell of coffee turned my stomach, but my head was pounding from all the tears and all the what-ifs playing across my mind all night long, and I thought perhaps the cream would make a cup of coffee count as breakfast if I could keep it down.

When I poured just a drip of cream into my cup, it erupted into volcanic bubbles in a hot spring, unspooling skeins of bridal lace, fireworks over a dark ocean, stars streaking across the night sky above a silent prairie.

And that's how I learned the world would go on. An irreplaceable life had winked out in an instant, but outside my window the world was flaring up in celebration. Someone was hearing, "It's benign." Someone was saying, "It's a boy." Someone was throwing out her arms and crying, "Thank you! Thank you! Oh, thank you!"¹

May God give us eyes of the heart to see the joy that is reaching out to us, looking at us, and daring to proclaim about us, even now, "Rejoice. Again I will say, rejoice."

¹ Renkl, Margaret (2019). "*Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss*." Published by Milkweed Editions, p. 219.