

THE JOY OF FELLOWSHIP
Philippians 1:3-11

Keeping the Joy Alive Series
July 14, 2013
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One of our family traditions each summer is to take the Sugarloaf Cove nature hike on the North Shore of Lake Superior. What makes this hike fun is that we have done it each summer with our grandchildren, and our son and daughter-in-law, from the time their children were born.

Along this nature trail there are wooden markers with numbers on them that correspond to an explanation in a self-guided booklet. At a few markers they talk about the vegetation and plants, while other ones point out some historic logging operation artifacts.

What makes this hike extra fun is that we have the tradition of taking Soren & Elise's pictures next to the number that reflects how old they are. Each year they literally run to their new number and marker. These kinds of times have a way of filling their grandma and grandpa with lots of joy.

This morning we begin a series of messages on the theme, "Keeping the Joy Going." During these weeks we will be studying and working our way through the Book of Philippians which can be called the "joy letter." In fact, sixteen times it talks about the gift of joy in life.

Now the Apostle Paul, it is important to note, was in prison when he wrote this letter. And the conditions he was under were terrible. History tells us that the prisoners were stripped naked, flogged, beating wounds went untreated, prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains, blood stained clothing was not replaced—most cells were dark, lack of water, sickening stench.

Now because of these awful conditions most prisoners begged for a quick death or they couldn't take it and committed suicide. But not Paul! He wrote about joy. In these worst of circumstances Paul talks about rejoicing in the Lord.

Also interesting to note are the people he is writing to—the Philippians. They were a small congregation that Paul started a few years before (read Acts 16). If you study about this church you find out that it was started in a community where many of the people were skeptical.

Large numbers of the people looked on Christianity as some kind of suspicious cult. To see people's lives radically changed by Christ they didn't know what to make of Christianity. Theirs was also a small religious organization that had some infighting—it had some conflicts like most every church.

There was also some confusing theology that was being tossed about by the leaders of this congregation. Some had not grasped fully the message Paul had brought to them about the good news of grace that is ours in Jesus Christ—they were rather trying to turn it into a legalism.

Others were taking this message of grace and turning it into an excuse to be able to go out and do whatever they pleased—to live however they wanted. The thinking was that God was going to forgive you anyway. So Paul is concerned about seeking to restore joy in this community.

Philippians, therefore, is a pastoral letter. It is very personal and very caring. Paul demonstrates that he really knows these people. He uses their names in places. It is not a faceless group. It is a very caring letter from a pastor to a congregation he knows and loves.

So let's read some of Paul's words. As I read these words I want you to know that I share these same sentiments of Paul for you—our Messiah congregation. These are also my loving words for you. (Read Philippians 1:3-11)

Now the first thing we see in this passage is that joy comes from fellowship, from a participating with God in relationship. In other words it's not just hanging out and drinking coffee. It is knowing and living in a relationship with Jesus by faith. Did you know God wants that for you?

Paul says, I am *"confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (before the 2nd Coming). Paul has such a deep relationship with God that he knows that God is not some indirect power—he can and will do great things in you.

What is your relationship with God these days? Is it distant? Have you lost touch with him? Jesus went to the cross, he died and rose again so that we might have a personal relationship with him by faith. And that, according to Paul, fills us with joy.

Another fellowship that fills us with joy is the fellowship with brothers and sisters in a congregation—in a community of faith. Paul says, *"I thank my God for you."* He is talking about a sense of oneness with those we worship with.

The word that is often used for this is *koinonia*. It is saying that I'm there for you; you hold me in your heart; you are on my mind in your challenges; I'm remembering you in my prayers. I pray for you that God will work what is best in you.

Paul is talking about the gift of fellowship—unwrapped and being enjoyed. The secret to joy is to abide in God in faith and love, and to love one another as Jesus loves you. Jesus said, *"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."* (John 15:11)

You may remember the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. As the Holy Spirit came upon the people, and as many came to believe in Jesus, they formed together in small groups. Acts 2:42-47 says that they cared for each other—that they ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

The great Lutheran pastor/theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis, wrote a little book called, *"Life Together."* He wrote, *"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in which we may participate."*

Ann Lamott, a more contemporary author wrote these words in her book, *"Traveling Mercies."* *"When (my minister) was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark."*

“She was very frustrated. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, ‘You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.’”

“And that is why,” Ann Lamott continues, “I have stayed so close to (my church)—because no matter how bad I’m feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can find my way home.”

A few months ago a large number of Messiah’s leaders participated in our own Leadership Retreat held at the Elk Lake Preserve. Alicia Davis, mission pastor at the Substance Church in the Cities and a former youth minister on my staff, did an excellent job leading this retreat.

One of the topics we spent a lot of time discussing is how we at Messiah have many people who are connected through various kinds of groups, and how we can help empower new groups and even more ways for people, members and non-members, to be connected in fellowship.

You know these past years we have heard so many testimonies from people about how important their small fellowship group is in their lives. In fact, some have said that they would have never been able to make it through a struggle, illness or a faith challenge without their group.

An important truth is that our weekly worship and coffee fellowship have so many people it is nearly impossible to make deeper friendships and connections. It is only as church people get involved in small recreation groups, discussion groups, cooking groups, serving groups, whatever—only there does true fellowship happen and only there is true joy realized. Please stay tuned as Messiah seeks to develop more of these opportunities.

Now just remember, my friends, this joy is more than just being happy, or giddy, or having a smile and tingly feelings on the inside. Joy in Jesus is much deeper because even in the midst of sadness and pain, or in the deepest struggles of life, you can know that Jesus will be with you.

God promises in Deuteronomy 6, *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* And in Matthew 28:20 Jesus said, *“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Be assured that whatever you are going through and dealing with today, that you can rejoice in his love.

And as you face the reality of death for a loved one, or the reality of your own death, be assured that as you lived by faith in this life, and as you shared in the joy of fellowship in Christ’s church on earth, that in death you will be united in the everlasting fellowship in heaven.

You will shine in the everlasting joy of Christ’s heavenly and eternal church where you will sing with the heavenly joyful chorus, *“Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.”* (Revelation 5:12). Wow, everlasting joy in the arms of Jesus!

My friends, Jesus has a great plan for your joy. May you continue to develop, and grow, your fellowship with God by faith and may you develop your fellowship, your koinonia, with others. May he who began this good work in you carry it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.