

Join the Joy Ride

Philippians 1:1-26

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I don't know what the pandemic did to your brains over the past year. For me, it produced a full-blown case of nostalgia.

This is probably not terribly surprising. In the face of all the uncertainty that has been our daily diet over the last eighteen months, many of us have found ourselves instinctively looking back—back to when things seemed more stable, more hopeful, more promising, or at least more predictable.

And so, over the last year and a half, I have found myself listening to music from the late eighties and early nineties as I do everything from writing sermons to doing the dishes to driving down the highway to barbecuing in the backyard.

I remember one particularly undiscerning summer day, I listened to a certain Swedish pop duo named Roxette. Think half of ABBA (half the members and probably half as good).

One of their more well-known songs from the early nineties was called “Joy Ride” and began with this bit of poetic brilliance:

Hello, you fool, I love you. C'mon join the joy ride.

Not exactly Shakespeare but what can I say? Nostalgia does weird things to the brain.

This summer we have decided to focus on the theme of joy. This seemed to our worship committee an appropriate theme, particularly after the eighteen months or so we've all been through.

And as it happens, the title of the summer worship resources we are using this year is “Joy Ride.” I doubt the writers got the title from Roxette—they almost certainly have better musical taste than I do.

But however they arrived at the title, it communicates something important. The “ride”—the life of Christian faith—is not a grim duty but an invitation to joy.

Jesus famously said that he has come that we might have life and have it to the full (John 10:10). He promised that his command to love was given “so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

And so, we’ll be spending most of our summer Sundays looking at Paul’s most joyful book, the letter to the Philippians.

There may be a few Sundays where speakers depart from this theme and do their own thing, but joy is on our agenda this summer.

As I thought about how I might introduce this series today, a single question kept coming back to me: “What is the shape of Paul’s joy?”

What does it look like? What are its contours? What contributes to it?

What can we learn about joy for our own time and place from this little letter written to a church in a much different time and place from our own?

On the face of it, Paul doesn’t have a great deal to be happy about.

He’s in jail, first of all, as verse 7 from our reading this morning makes clear. Paul was frequently imprisoned throughout his public ministry. The book of Acts records three specific imprisonments in Rome, Philippi, and Caesarea, but there were likely others.

Paul also has a lot of enemies. He was a bit of a blunt instrument, at times. He often said precisely what he thought and didn’t hold back. He would not fare terribly well in our cultural context where it seems to take very little to cause offense.

Paul was mistreated terribly and endured all kinds of trials. He was viewed as a heretic by many of his Jewish contemporaries and some kind of a weird cultish leader by the Romans. Several times, he was flogged or stoned almost to the point of death.

Paul spent a lot of time on the road relying on the hospitality of others, which doesn’t sound super fun to some of us. A few of his road trips also included shipwrecks which also doesn’t sound fun.

Paul likely wasn't wealthy. In 2 Corinthians 11:27, he says "I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." Again, not super fun.

Paul was single and likely had his lonely moments (I suspect Paul would have been a difficult husband. I have had female friends who are familiar with the New Testament verify this suspicion ☺).

So, given all that he has endured and is presently enduring when he writes the letter to the Philippians, why on earth is Paul happy?

Many of us have endured a difficult year or so. For some of you, perhaps even the most difficult year of your life. But I doubt many of us could hold our sufferings up to those of Paul's.

(I say this fully acknowledging that ranking suffering is a risky and ultimately fruitless business!)

The question remains. What is the shape of Paul's joy?

I don't tend to have four-point sermons, but here are four things I see about joy in the first chapter of Philippians.

Paul's joy is generous and non-judgmental.

This one likely sounds surprising and possibly even counterintuitive given all that we know of Paul and of the bracing language he sometimes uses.

Paul is not always generous with his opponents, and he certainly *seems* judgmental at times.

In one particularly grouchy passage where he is angry at the Galatians for reverting back to Jewish laws rather than embracing their freedom in Christ, he rather uncharitably advises a group of false teachers to go and castrate themselves. Which doesn't sound particularly generous.

But here in prison we see another side of Paul. In verses 15-18, Paul acknowledges that some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry and all kinds of mixed motives.

He hints at the fact that some might even be seizing upon the fact that Paul is in jail and trying to hurt him by muscling in on his territory. We could forgive Paul for being bitter and angry at his plight, or for sharpening his pen for a take-down.

And yet, Paul says, “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice” (Phil. 1:18).

I could be reading into Paul’s words here, but I sense a recognition that we are all flawed and fallen creatures, even those who presume to speak of Christ. We all have mixed motives. We all have selfish moments.

Even faith in Christ and the spreading of the gospel does not escape the web of sin and frailty that we are all bound up in. Paul seems to know this.

But he cares less about the purity of the messenger than he does about the hope of the message.

We could use this reminder, couldn’t we? Particularly in our cultural moment where so many seem to almost *delight* in taking judgment to new levels.

One of the ugliest sides of this pandemic is that it gave a lot of people a lot of time with nothing to do besides go on their computers and yell at each other about everything from vaccines to politics to social justice issues to whatever else was dominating the never-ending hysteria of the news cycle.

We are forever calling one another out and shouting down those whose moral performance does not match our own (or, more accurately, our imagined version of our own).

Here Paul models a joy that does not depend on human reliability or virtue. A joy that acknowledges limitation, that we all see through a glass darkly.

A joy that is simply grateful that Christ and his gospel are proclaimed.

Paul’s joy is anchored in community.

The Philippian church and their faith is a source of joy for Paul. This comes through right at the beginning of the passage.

I thank my God every time I remember you... I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now... I have you in my heart... God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Clearly Paul loves and is loved by the church in Philippi.

We are created for relationship and for community. Perhaps we have been reminded of this more than ever during this pandemic.

I read an article in *The New York Times* this week called “There’s a Specific King of Joy We’ve Been Missing.” It talks about the joy of going back to a concert after eighteen months, about what it’s like to be part of the crowd again.

Here’s what the author says:

Research has found that people laugh five times as often when they’re with others as when they’re alone. Even exchanging pleasantries with a stranger on a train is enough to spark joy... **Peak happiness lies mostly in collective activity.**

We find our greatest bliss in moments of **collective effervescence**. It’s a concept coined... by the pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorming session, cousins at a religious service or teammates on a soccer field. And during this pandemic, it’s been largely absent from our lives.¹

I don’t think Paul would have used the term “collective effervescence,” but he clearly knew deep in his bones the joy and hope that comes from being part of a group with a shared purpose.

This is what I think many of us are hoping we will recover in the months ahead.

Even with the blessings of Zoom and Facetime and digital connections of various kinds, many of us have still missed the specific kind of joy that comes by being together.

Paul’s joy is rooted in a hope beyond death.

In verses 21-24, Paul writes these words:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html>

two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

I suspect many of us struggle to track with Paul here. We are not nearly so torn. We'll go on living in the body, thank you very much! Jesus can wait.

This could be because of our material comfort relative to Paul's context and most of human history. It's tough to long for heaven when things are pretty good right here.

It could also be because we struggle to believe in a hope that goes beyond this life, that being with Christ is anything more than a nice metaphor.

Many have grown up with and have a distaste for a version of Christianity that is "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good."

Faith should make a difference here and now, surely! The biblical vision is one of justice and peace and healing and forgiveness not in the sky by and by but here and now! Don't we pray, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done *on earth*...?"

I suspect I speak for many when I say that I was so grateful to encounter a more expansive vision of faith than "Pray a prayer and wait for Jesus to vacuum you up to heaven when you die."

And yet. I wonder if we still have the capacity to long to be with Jesus.

Or do we mostly see faith as a world- and self-improvement project that God is willing to help us out with a bit along the way?

The last eighteen months have perhaps sharpened the question for some of us. We've been thinking about death a lot during this pandemic. But I'm not always convinced we've been thinking of it very well.

I had a conversation with a friend about this earlier this week. We talked about the pandemic, about the lengths to which we have gone to protect the vulnerable, about the challenges of balancing risk and freedom and human connection going forward.

I mentioned this passage and asked what is for us, perhaps, an uncomfortable question, but would not have been for Paul.

Do we really believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain?

Is this reflected in our practice? Or has the church, with our culture, become terrified of death because deep down we don't really believe there's anything on the other side?

Even while acknowledging that we were created for life and that it is normal to want to live long and full lives, and that death is the enemy of life, should we not *also* as Christians have at least a *somewhat* different attitude toward death than those who do not believe?

Paul was not afraid to die. He was convinced that Jesus was waiting on the other side. And it brought him a deep and settled joy.

Paul's joy comes from a confidence in the supremacy and sufficiency of God.

One of the most hopeful verses in all of Scripture is Philippians 1:6:

[B]eing confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

We sometimes imagine that so much depends on us.

If we're Christians of a more conservative persuasion, we imagine that it's up to get our doctrine all perfectly straight and lined up so that we believe precisely the right things about God and are doing our best to convince others of these things.

If we're Christians of a more liberal persuasion, we imagine that it's up to us usher in the kingdom, to make peace, to pursue justice, to lift up the oppressed, to speak for the marginalized, and to convince others to join the world-improvement project.

It will not surprise you to learn that I think both of these emphases are important.

It's important that we think clearly about God and about what God has done in Jesus Christ. It's important that our actions in the world, as individuals and as a church, line up with God's purposes, God's vision for *shalom* for the whole world.

It's important that we share the good news of Jesus Christ in both word and deed.

But we'll never get either our words or our deeds completely right. We will never fully disentangle ourselves from selfish motives and sin and limitations and inadequacies and blind spots of all sorts.

Thank God that it does *not* all depend on us. Thank God that the One who began a good work— in our lives and in our world— will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

There is enormous freedom in letting go of our illusions that everything depends on us. Our words and our deeds are far less frantic and anxious and self-interested when they proceed from the well-spring of the grace and love of God than desperate attempts to earn our salvation or prove our merits.

There is liberation in the ongoing discovery that God is God, and we are not.

So, this is the shape of Paul's joy. This is what the "joy ride" of faith in Christ looks like based on Philippians 1.

Christian joy:

- is generous and non-judgmental
- is anchored in community and a shared vision to pursue
- is rooted in a hope beyond death
- comes from a confidence in the supremacy and sufficiency of God

May God fill us ever more with this joy. And may God help us to be a source of this joy to those around us.

Amen.

