

No Matter What: Rejoice

Philippians 1:18b-26

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Years ago, I came across an extraordinary prayer written by a young pastor from Zimbabwe titled "A Zimbabwean Martyr's Prayer." The prayer – which is more of a manifesto than anything, was found among the papers of this young pastor after his untimely death over 100 years ago. According to Southern Nazarene University, the prayer/manifesto was passed on by a missionary by the name of Louise Robinson Chapman who served in Africa from 1920-1940. Years later, the prayer became known as "The Fellowship of the Unashamed." I've got to tell you, it's one of those things that once you hear it you just never forget it.

I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of [Jesus Christ]. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed. My present makes sense. My future is secure. I'm finished with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving, and [limited] goals. I no longer need prosperity, position, promotions, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by faith, I walk by patience, I am uplifted by prayer and labor by power. My pace is set. My road is narrow. My way is rough. My companions are few. My guide is reliable, and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the adversary's presence, negotiate at the enemy's table, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, or let up until I've stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, and preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. So I'll go until He comes, give until I drop, and work until Jesus stops me. And when he returns, he'll have no problem recognizing me. My banner will be clear!

I've always been inspired by where that level of commitment comes from. I mean, what does it take

to experience that degree of focused faith that enables a person to lay everything down to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? I believe it comes from having a deep awareness of joy in our lives –being joyful.

Last week, Pastor Jeff introduced our new series entitled, "No Matter What..." We're moving through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians from which we get a strong sense of Paul's commitment to Jesus Christ and a deep sense of joy that empowers him to help others grow in their faith – no matter what! Jeff talked us through the first 11 verses of chapter 1. In those verses we encounter the gratitude in Paul's heart for this community of believers. Today I want us to look at verses 18 through 26. And I want us to see the engine behind Paul's faith which is joy. Let me read the whole passage for you, and then I want to break it down into a couple of points.

[Philippians 1:18b-26] *"...I will continue to rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.* This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Here's a bit of context for us. When Paul was on his second missionary journey from the fall of the year 49 to the summer of 50, he started a small church in Philippi, a city in northern Greece. Paul loved these people. These people loved Paul. He was their guy. The commitment to one another was deep. And that love and affection is clearly evident from his letter. Twelve years after Paul started the church there, he was in jail in Rome on trial for his life. In those intervening years, this Philippian church had financially supported Paul in his ministry more than

any other church. And when they found out that he was on trial for his life – for not ever backing down from talking about Jesus, much like that pastor from Zimbabwe, they didn't disassociate with him to save their lives. Instead, they doubled down; they sent another missionary named Epaphroditus with all kinds of financial aid and physical support.

But Epaphroditus also brings bad news to Paul in Rome. He tells Paul that the Christians in Philippi are being bullied by unbelievers and their faith is being severely tested. They're hearing that Paul is in prison and on trial for his very life, and they don't know if he is going to survive. They're distraught. If the church is attacked in Philippi and Paul dies in Rome, what's going to happen to the gospel? So, Paul writes this joyful letter to the 1st century church in Philippi and tells them that the gospel of Christ is far too great to depend on his fate for its effectiveness. That no matter what, they should focus on the joy of living in Christ. Paul is inviting them into the fellowship of the unashamed.

As a congregation in the 21st century, we're facing all kinds of joys and challenges, changes and transitions. That's just natural and normal. Every day in every way things change. The question for us, though, is how we will continue to move ahead in healthy ways. And how does this ancient wisdom from scripture help us do that. The passage that I read from Philippians is so rich with wisdom. Let me tease out a couple of things that I believe will help us.

First, in the midst of challenge, no matter what, the starting point is always Joy.

The Philippian Christians felt like their backs were against the wall. How do you grow a church, to say nothing of maintaining a congregation of Christ followers when your leader is 800 miles away. In Rome. In a prison cell. About to die. The challenges that the Philippian church faced were epic. Moving forward seemed impossible. So Paul, sitting in his little prison cell gets right to it. The first thing to do when facing a challenge is to **locate the joy**. After Paul had acknowledged the challenges they were facing, he writes in *verse 18b*, *"I will continue to rejoice..."* That was Paul's way of saying, "No matter what..." I'm going to locate myself in joy.

When we're faced with challenges, finding joy first is the last thing we feel equipped to do. When we're faced with challenges, finding joy is much more than simply having a positive mental attitude about life; it's way beyond walking into a horse barn to clean the stalls and saying to yourself, ***"You know, there's just got to be a pony lurking in here someplace..."***

Locating the joy is about embracing the truth that "No Matter What" happens, we're secure in Christ, and that's reason for joy, no matter what. It's knowing that no matter how things change, no matter what kinds of transitions we're facing, no matter how dire things become, we can rejoice in the reality of being held together even when we feel like we're completely falling apart.

Let me ask you this: when you first heard that Pastor Jeff Marian was embracing some exciting career changes and moving into some new opportunities in his life next year, didn't it feel a little like there was no joy in Mudville? As the news of Jeff's retirement rolled out and a few people checked in with me about it, I couldn't help thinking of the classic Earnest Lawrence Thayer poem, *Casey At The Bat*.

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;
And somewhere [folks] are laughing, and somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Burnsville—mighty Marian is heading out.*

When human beings experience challenge, it's completely normal to break into a sweat, wring our hands, and respond to the cortisol exploding in our brains with the "Either/Or" choice, fight or flight. How very binary of us, right? Our first response is to ask questions like these: What's happening? What on earth are we going to do? Who's going to lead us? How are we ever going to find someone to fill Jeff Marian's shoes?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are going to be just fine. The good news is that there is a third option. And that third option is to "locate the joy." Lest we forget, the leadership that Jeff Marian, together with the staff, the Board, the Foundation, and thousands of disciples have leaned into together in partnership with the Holy Spirit has set us on a joyful trajectory toward the future that God is creating. If we've

learned anything through the years, it's this: there is great joy in knowing that "No Matter What" the challenge, however impossible it seems, when plans in life take unexpected turns and things change, the best first step forward is toward locating the joy.

Second, Paul moves on from the starting point of locating joy to what we'll call the Kingdom equation: **In the midst of challenge, no matter what, "Prayer + Spirit = Deliverance."**

That's a really good equation of hope. "Prayer + the Holy Spirit = deliverance, salvation, rescue, a way forward."

In verse 19 Paul continues, "... I know that your prayers and help of the Spirit of Christ will deliver me..." Paul knew that the church in Philippi was not his church, it was God's church. Paul, more than anyone knew that the leadership of the church transcended any of them, and that it only by the Spirit's presence that the body of Christ experienced joy. Pastor Jeff would be the first to say that none of this is about him. I'll tell you that too: what we do together – all of us, is not about Jeff, or me, or Sandy, or Jody, or Jason, or Mark or Amy, or any one individual. This is all about the Body of Christ - what God is doing in this place with all of us together. To borrow a phrase from a message I preached three weeks ago, "There were a lot of people here before any of us got here. There will be a lot of people who follow, long after any of us have gone."

Committing all of that to prayer is where you come in. Friends, I want to simply encourage you to join your prayers with the Holy Spirit to "deliver" this ministry into each other's' hands and into the capable hands of future leaders. Come what may, no matter what, there will be much joy in this place as we pray for the Call Team, that they will listen and discern God's direction securing a new leader for Prince of Peace.

When we join together in doing that, we'll discover that in the midst of challenge, the focus is always on Christ. In verse 21, Paul writes these words: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Let me just say that again: "To live is Christ... to die is gain." Friends, that's really a deep and abiding joy. To arrive at a point in our journey with Christ and to be able to say, 'To live is Christ and to die is gain' is kind of the ultimate manifesto. To embrace Paul's words: To live is Christ, to Die is gain is to say, "Come what may, no

matter what goes on, we are held in God's gracious hands."

How do we move into that this week? We locate the joy, we pray with the Spirit, and we focus on Christ. What does that look like? Let's start right here... In his letter to this congregation about the changes and challenges ahead, Pastor Jeff encouraged us to focus on Christ. Here's what he said:

"In the days and weeks ahead ... continue to be the faithful, supportive disciples that I've come to know and love. Significant transitions can leave us feeling anxious and uncertain about the future. So, be present for one another and encourage one another. Increase your investment of time, talent, heart and financial support. Remember, we are called to connect! Now is not the time to sit back, watch and wait. Now is the time to expectantly lean into what God has in store next, trusting the Spirit to guide us. I am grateful for your continued partnership in ministry. Together, let's invest ourselves into making this coming year a springboard into the future, confident that God has given Prince of Peace everything needed to thrive into this next year and for many years to come."

Did you catch that last line? Did you catch the challenge and then the reminder? Here's the challenge: "Together, let's invest ourselves into making this coming year a springboard into the future..." That's the challenge because that's going to take a commitment on our part to trust the Spirit in the process. And the reminder? Perhaps the reminder is the most important part:

"God has given Prince of Peace everything needed to thrive into this next year and for many years to come."