

Sermon Series: Philippians -- Good News

March 30, 2014

Title: Joy for the Journey

Text: Philippians 3:1-11

Summary:

Winners and Losers?

Last shot:

The faces in the crowd said it all: who won and who lost.

Last weekend Wichita State faced Kentucky in the NCAA's Men's Basketball Tournament, better known as "March Madness." Wichita was the 1seed; Kentucky the 8 seed. But as the game progressed it became apparent that this one was going down to the buzzer. Over and over, the teams exchanged the lead, but neither team was able to pull away. Finally, with 3.2 seconds left in the game, and down by 2 points, Wichita State inbounded the ball. A three pointer would win the game and send them on to the Sweet Sixteen.

They got their shot off in time, but it faded to the right, bounced off the rim, and the buzzer sounded. In an instant the entire arena was transformed into a contrast of euphoria and grief. Kentucky players swarmed onto the court. Wichita State players pulled their their jerseys over their heads, eyes glazed with the shock of suffering defeat and elimination from the tournament. Kentucky fans waved their banners and roared their delight; Wichita State fans stood silent with tears running down their faces.

So good and so bad, all at the same time! Heart-pounding joy and crushing disappointment side by side for the whole world to see. And that's the way it had to be. After all, everyone who filed into the stadium a few hours before knew that half of them would leave on top of the world, while the other half would be slinking back to their hotels wondering what might have been.

Winners and Losers:

Winners and losers: that's the world we live in. A basketball tournament is just an imitation of the wider world in which we live. It pits teams and their fans -- tribes, if you will -- against each other in a fight to the finish. Each tribe arrives decked out in its regalia -- team colors, emblazoned with the team mascot or the number of a favorite player. On the court each team wears the colors of the tribe. Each team hopes to experience the joy of victory and the hope of moving on to the next round, all in the quest of the grand prize.

People have been dividing themselves up into tribes for untold ages. They've donned furs and feathers, uniforms and ethnic costumes as a way of setting themselves apart as a special group within the human family. They've fought wars, stolen lands and resources, imposed their language and culture on the tribes they have conquered. Like the basketball tournament, there are always winners and losers. For every Russia there has to be a Ukraine.

To the winners goes the euphoria of victory. To the losers goes the shame and despair of defeat.

Winners and losers.

Is there ever a "win/win"?

All of this raises the question: Is this the way God created His world? Did He create the world to be "dog eat dog," and "survival of the fittest"? Did He put us all down here to duke it out with the last woman or man standing as the victor? Does being happy and filled with joy depend on our tribe being better than all the rest?

Paul writes to the Philippians:

Philippians 3:1 NIV

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

So just what does Paul mean by "rejoice"? Does he mean that our team wins and everyone else loses? Or is Paul opening the door for another possibility, one in which something bigger than human tribes happens in our lives, something as big as God's plan for His Creation?

Rejoice in the Lord!

Joy

Joy has a special meaning in God's Word. It is the only proper response to God and His Creation. In Job we discover God saying:

Job 38:4-7 NIV

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set,

**or who laid its cornerstone —
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?**

The same God who put the world in place continues to re-create His world, taking the broken bits and pieces of His Creation and making all things new. The psalm writer says:

Isaiah 51:3 NIV

**The Lord will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;**

**he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.**

**Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.**

This is a joy rooted not in the emotion of the moment, but in the deep power and love of our Creator. This a joy that knows our world is safe in His hands. This is joy that springs from being rescued and restored by Him.

Not about "our team"!

Paul follows his command to "rejoice in the Lord" with a seemingly strange set of warnings:

Philippians 3:2 NIV

Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

What Paul is referencing here is the age-old human tendency to find one's true identity and value in the Tribe. He singles out his own ethnic identity, turning it on its head, as it were, to point his readers to a radically new way of knowing and celebrating who are are.

Paul will go on to describe his impeccable credentials as a Pharisaic Jewish rabbi. In every tribal category he was #1. Put him on the court and he would be every game's MVP. He was properly initiated into Israel, had the right ancestry, belonged to the most serious religious group, attacked the enemies of the truth as he saw it, and kept all the rules. Result? He was the perfect example of the Tribe. Everything about him, what he did, how he thought, what he believed and what he opposed, lined up with the tribe.

But now he is warning the Philippian Christians against the temptation to think that in order to find God and His salvation they must first belong to a tribe -- even the ancient people of Israel.

He warns the Philippians to beware of the "dogs." Jewish people referred to Gentiles as "dogs." Now Paul is saying that those who want to come and force the ancient tribalism of Israel on Gentile believers are the ones who are the "dogs."

He warns against "men who do evil." Here he is ironically referring to people who did the "works" of the Law as a way of demonstrating that they were God's chosen Tribe. Now Paul says that what they think of as good works are actually doing more harm than good!

Finally, he warns against "those mutilators of the flesh." Ancient pagans sometimes cut or mutilated themselves as an act of service to the gods. Paul compares this religious mutilation to the demand of Jewish tribalists that Gentiles be circumcised as Jewish converts before they can follow Jesus.

"Rejoice in The Lord!"

Why such strong language? It's not that Paul was in any way anti-Semitic. He was, after all, a Jewish person himself. Instead, he is steering the Philippian believers away from a destructive tribal mentality that he feared would rob them of the joy and new identity that God alone could bring them.

Philippians 3:3 NIV

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

Here is the new identity, made up of people who have been birthed anew by God Himself through His Spirit. They are *not* defined by what Paul calls "the flesh." They do not derive their joy from religious customs; they do not derive their identity from human categories or divisions. They do not boast of their ancestry, personal performance, or religious heritage. They only boast in King Jesus.

Followers of Jesus are never meant to be just another tribe of human beings vying for supremacy in the world. They are a brand new creation, made up of people from all ethnic backgrounds. They share the joy of being God's children, birthed brand new by His creative power. They are destined to join in the deep joy of Heaven, a new kind of Tribe made up of people from the entire human family. That is why the elders and living creatures sing a new song of praise to Jesus the King:

Revelation 5:9-10 NIV

And they sang a new song, saying:

**"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.**

**You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."**

Joy for the Journey

The great exchange:

So how do we enter into this deep joy -- the joy that permeates Heaven itself?

It begins with leaving behind the "lesser joys" of the old creation. It begins by seeing that a win/lose world will never bring about the restoration of God's good world. for every winner there will always be those who lose out.

The deep, great joy of Heaven requires a new way of investing ourselves. Paul puts it this way:

Philippians 3:7-8a NIV

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

The old, "normal" way of thinking is that if we can get on the right team we will be more important and have a better shot at winning. Remember standing in the playground, waiting to be picked for a baseball or softball team? Remember wishing and hoping that you'd be picked for the good team, the one with the really good players? Remember what it felt like to be the last one picked? The bottom of the barrel? Winners and losers.

But Paul is saying that he's done with pecking orders, tribal contests, false human categories that devalue human beings made in God's Image. He doesn't want to be on any earthly team or be part of any earthly Tribe. He wants to know in the deepest way possible the King of God's New Human Family. He'll give up everything else for that privilege!

The new identity:

What does God's New Family look like? What is the badge that marks you out as a member? Paul sums it up with these words:

Philippians 3:8b-9 NTW translation

In fact, because of the Messiah I've suffered the loss of everything, and I now calculate it as trash, so that my profit may be the Messiah, and that I may be discovered in him, not having my own covenant status defined by Torah, but the status which comes through the Messiah's faithfulness: the covenant status from God which is given to faith.

Paul's new status is not based on his performance. It has nothing to do with him demonstrating to the world that he belongs to the best Tribe. Instead, the badge of belonging to God's New Family is simply his own faith and trust in Jesus' faithfulness as the One who finally fulfilled the requirements of God's Covenant with Israel. When God sees our faith, He grants us full "covenant status," full membership in His New Family.

Joy for the journey:

How tempting for us as Christians to get swept up in the battles of the day. How tempting to see ourselves as just one more beleaguered tribe in an increasingly hostile culture. How tempting to think that we have to conform to the demands of a human tribe in order to be pleasing to God. How tempting to measure our success or failure in terms of the win/lose categories of this old world!

Paul challenges us to do what Jesus did: walk off the court; forfeit the match. He challenges us to join Jesus in the Creator's Journey:

Philippians 3:10-11 NIV

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

To the world this looks like the Loser's Journey. It sounds like getting picked for the team that always gets laughed off the playground. It looks like the path to extinction.

But when we realize that God is making everything new, then it all begins to make sense. God is creating a whole new Humanity as brothers and sisters of King Jesus. And the only way to be part of that new reality is by knowing Christ, being found in Him, and joining Him in His death/resurrection journey. The only way to be part of that new reality is by trusting Him -- trusting Him enough to follow Him into the new Life God is giving us.