

The Rock: 03-14-2021

Philippians: The letter of Joy

First reading: Ephesians 6:12

Title: Standing firm

Scripture: Philippians 1:27-30

Theme:

God has called every one of us to bloom where He plants us, to stand strong in spite of what happens, and to be reminded again that the battle is won already.

Introduction:

The older I get, the more I am reminded of the journey of life. I remember things folks over the years have said both encouraging and discouraging.

I have had moments when I was so very proud of what has happened and thankful to God for it all. But then there are those times of just plain embarrassment at my behavior.

Sitting back and wondering if at any point the people around me saw any of Jesus in my foolishness. We all have those moments in life.

After a while of looking at one's life and journey, we should simply know that we are sinners saved by grace and debtors to mercy alone.

That is the most joyful thing I hold onto. Because that is good soil to grow forward in. My failures belong to me alone, and my successes are God's, because He has blessed me and carried me.

All of us, I hope can say such things. Because to those who we want to reach and love and to talk to about Jesus see these things in us. The good and the bad.

The Story:

How we live, behave, enjoy life, and respond to the things around us shows what we believe. Our lives speak volumes about where our heart is at.

It doesn't mean we don't struggle, and it doesn't mean we won't miss the mark. It just means we know who is always right there to pick us up and encourage us.

Honestly, I had a hard time with this week because of what Paul writes here:

"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that

you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”

-Philippians 1:29-30 ESV

A hard time because he drops this in the letter of joy, and if we are honest, probably not a verse we want to toss up on the fridge next to all the other inspiring ones.

It seems that not only has God given us the ability to believe Him, His grace to us in Christ, but has granted to us, for the sake of Christ, and being a believer in this world, that necessity to suffer for being a believer.

I know, not an encouraging word this morning, but just like last week when Paul said: To live is Christ and to die is gain, this is here right in front of us and therefore, important for us.

Because in all of our joy, we have to realize that we are also in conflict - with who, though?

The enemy of our souls. Remember Paul is not in prison because he stole jelly beans from the local Walmart. He is in prison because he keeps telling people about Jesus rising from the dead.

That He is the true King and Lord of this world and true joy and happiness is found

in following Him. That's why he is in jail, for simply telling people the truth, and for the Roman government, that was too offensive.

We have to always remember who we are really fighting against, in order to live and to love in the right way. We don't fight against flesh and blood.

No, Paul tells us that the real battle is elsewhere, but is being played out in real time in this world:

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

-Ephesians 6:12 ESV

The battle is against a very real enemy, who, in a last-ditch effort to "win" a battle he has already lost, is using God's image bearers (human beings) as pawns in that war.

Silence the opposition! Keep the Church from being the Church and telling people about this Jewish carpenter who died on a cross to fix this broken world.

That's the goal, and Paul is standing against that tide. The Church down

through the ages has stood against that tide, and that is what she is called to do still. To stand on the promises of God that are all yes in Jesus.

Starting with this victory over death. To understand Paul's joy, we need to understand his world-view. How he saw living, dying, joy and now suffering, all at the same time.

His joy wasn't situation and circumstantial. That we learned last week was a daily struggle to stand on God's promises and facts, rather than how he felt at those tough moments.

You can be scared, confused, angry and lonely, and yet still be very joyful. That doesn't make sense, but it doesn't make you crazy either. Rather it makes you honest.

So, when we understand that the hardest life to live is the Christian journey, and verse 29 makes that clear, we need to grab onto and hold tightly to the truth that God is still God whether I am in the comfort of the palace, or in the pain of the prison.

I can be, and should be full of joy because I have made much of Jesus:

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether

I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel..."

-Philippians 1:27 ESV

Just as a quick aside, this doesn't necessarily mean that we are on the street corner trying to be the next Billy Graham. For starters, that doesn't work in our culture today. And I'm not entirely certain it ever worked.

What it means is that because we have the answers to all the questions, we can live in a way that shows our confidence in those troubling times.

It means we find the deep beauty and joy of Kayaking on the lake and river in the early morning hours and seeing God in the creation itself.

In Skiing through fresh fallen snow and knowing that God cares that much about His creation that these types of things find their way into our lives, just as the many struggles.

Joy is found in it all, and THAT is the point.

You see, part of the struggle we have is that we either think that because I am a

Christian, I am immune from suffering,
pain, trials, etc.

Or we have this false faith belief that
God will never let A, B or C happen to
us. If it does that must mean my faith is
somehow not strong enough.

So, when bad things happen, we question
our faith and then question God, and
sadly question our belief in God because
we can't seem to reconcile the two.

If God is real, and He loves me and this
world He created, why is there suffering?
That is a profound question.

The problem we have to tackle here is
that if situational joy, happiness,
prosperity, health and an easy life are
indicators of God's love for His people,
then;

We would have to conclude that God hated
the Apostle Paul, and for that matter the
Apostle Peter and all the others who
struggled, suffered and were martyred for
sharing Jesus.

Yet, God want us living on the side of
the road either as depressed and
miserable cast-offs who thrive on abuse
as some form of sanctification, as though
we have some crazy death wish.

That's not God's plan either. Paul here really wants these folks in Philippi to know, and us too, to realize we will not get through to the end of our Christian journey unscathed.

If we are living in such a way which honor's God, not being jerks for Jesus remember, but God honoring in a world that is not, we will have conflict.

This should not surprise us, except too often it does, and it's because we either don't read our Bibles enough, or we simply avoid the passages where the writers make these things clear.

I don't like those lines. They aren't happy feel good. But listen, it takes this whole Bible to make a whole Christian. That's not being a downer, that's looking at life with eyes wide open.

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

-John 15:18-19 ESV

"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

-John 16:33b ESV

Again, we aren't talking about being an obnoxious jerks for Jesus and then getting into trouble for it. No! This is simply living the life of a believer in a world that is in conflict with its creator.

That is part of what it means to suffer for Christ's sake. Remember, the conflict that Paul faced was that he was proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth was this world's King and Lord.

A treasonous statement in the Roman world, as the divine Caesars in Rome had already laid claim to those titles. They did so, just like every other king and kingdom throughout history -through brute force and war.

Jesus, that Jewish carpenter did so through humble submission to the will of God. Suffering and death, the Easter understanding, isn't it? The path of victory is through death. A bizarre thing to get our hands around.

Not only was Paul proclaiming this, but he was living his life in a way that declared it to all those who saw and heard him.

This is what he is encouraging his friends to do in verse 27. Live a life

worthy of the gospel. Your very lives are the testimony of God in this world, that Jesus is King and that he did rise and lives in you through His Holy Spirit.

These are not simple things, or even the "fun" things. But, to disciple ourselves and each other it is important to chew on these things. Especially given that the world grows increasingly anti-gospel every day.

We need to remind ourselves again that the Christian life is out of step with the way the world functions. As a result, you will get noticed and sometimes ridiculed, insulted, and railed against for your "archaic" stances on things.

Sadly, this is happening more and more. But in a very bizarre way, I can and do find joy in it all. I have a settled peace about God's promises even when I am uneasy and feeling like Paul. To die is gain.

If you aren't a believer in Jesus, but are here today, that is not an accident. Nor is the feeling that hearing these things makes you wonder how weird Christians are.

I admitted last week that it is weird, but it's also true. Jesus doesn't take away your problems and struggles -after

all he is not a made-up god, some slot machine genie.

He is the Risen King and loves you deeply. Coming to Him changes your heart, and gives you a new perspective.

I'm not going to lie. It is hard work on our parts to get to that place of settled peace and joy. His strength is what we need and have!

Learning to fight against our own inclinations because it seems easier to shout out against the darkness than it is to live a life that shines like the light of glory found in Jesus.

We all have to wrestle with ourselves, with our past, and how that defines our future. We have to confront the wounds that come our way and our reactions to them.

That is our spiritual growth, becoming mature in Christ, that's working out our salvation.

Remember when I talked about some of those folks who had abandoned Paul, and were working against him, and when he and Barnabas split because of Mark?

Listen, these things happen to all of us. How we handle them, how we confront them determines a lot of things.

Paul wrestled with himself and allowed the Holy Spirit to grow him, encourage him and give him that joy and peace. It made him better than the day before, but not quite as good as he would be the next day.

In one of his earliest times of sharing his testimony of how Jesus found him and saved him, he said he was one untimely born.

Much later in life as he wrote to Timothy, he simply says he is the worst of sinners. He is not being a depressed Eeyore -woe is me..

No. he had grown, had worked out a lot of things in his daily living of life. We'll see that in chapter three, when he talks about what is really important and valuable in life.

The closer he got to God in his relationship and prayers (maturity), the more he reflected on himself in light of what Jesus had done for him.

Grace and mercy grew, and he could handle anything that came his way because he knew that suffering was part of the deal. But God in His mercy, kept him.

Nothing the Romans threw at him could change his joy, because he knew he had a great reward -not just in heaven, but

right here, right now in the life he was living.

How? Well, his heart was full because the church in Philippi and so many more like it were growing, and Jesus was being made known.

Their support of him and his ability to teach them about how we are to endure and find joy in all of life, in spite of what is thrown at us.

Corrie Ten-Boom -put in a concentration camp with her sister after her family was arrested for harboring Jews, and helping them escape from the Nazi's, found joy even in her struggles to survive in such a place.

God was still God. She and her family had done what Jesus would have done, lived as Paul would have lived and encouraged as he did in these few verses from this morning.

Yet still, the reward for living such a life to glorify God and helping others was what? Prison.

There are so many things she said and learned on her journey through the darkness of those camps -

Just a couple of words from her that I find helpful as I learn to sort things out and we close this morning:

"Today, I know that such memories are the key not to the past, but to the future. I know the experiences of our lives, when we let God use them, become the mysterious and perfect preparation for the work He will give us to do."

"If you look at the world you will be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. But if you look at Christ, you will be at rest."

-Corrie Ten-Boom

That was her growth, it is reflective of Paul's growth as well. All of this comes when we live our lives out in a manner worthy of the gospel. In a way that honors Jesus, and reaches out to those who are still lost.

In spite of this world, we are joyfully journeying knowing that no matter what, God has got this all under control.