

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: A Good Day for a Good Day”
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Philippians 1:20-30

Today we read from one of Paul’s prison letters, and the church in Philippi was Paul’s first church in Europe. The city of Philippi was a Roman colony and the people were Roman citizens, although most of its inhabitants would actually have been Greek. Thus, the converts to whom Paul is writing would virtually all have been Gentiles. Just previous to where we come in today, Paul has written that some people are spreading the gospel for their own gain and to make his situation more dire; but that regardless of their motives, he still rejoices, for the gospel is being spread either way.

I read an article this week called, “21 Cliché Inspirational Quotes That Everyone Needs to Stop Using Immediately” ... And, of course, I read it after I had turned in the title for my sermon! Though my title wasn’t on the list, it certainly could have been. Some quotes from the list:

1. “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.”
2. “You have to look through the rain to see the rainbow.”
3. “Yesterday is history, tomorrow a mystery, and today is a gift. That’s why we call it the present.”
4. “Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.”
5. “If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”
6. “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.”
7. “Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

And the list went on... Well, I can’t help it... I like cliché inspirational quotes!

Sometimes we need something simple and cutesy, yet at the same time rather profound, to hang our struggles upon and help keep us on course.

Life isn’t easy. And we are called as Christians to stand up against those things which contradict the gospel, and we are called to endure those things which may ultimately lead to the furthering of the kingdom... and bring us in closer unity with Christ.

Last week John talked about Pollyanna, and how Pollyanna has come to mean something that is “unreasonable or illogically optimistic.” We used to sometimes tease my mother and call her “Pollyanna”. And she didn’t like it. I would ask her, “What’s the problem, that your epitaph will say ‘She was too positive? She was too nice?’” Not a bad legacy.

This is where we are with Paul and his talk of rejoicing in the face of possible death. It seems rather “Pollyannaish”, but is actually the foundation of being rooted in Christ. As he said in a different letter to the Romans, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” What matters to Paul is that no matter what happens to him, whether he lives or dies, Christ is exalted. And that is what should matter most to us. No one looks forward to suffering. Those of us here today are fortunate that we are free to believe, and proclaim that belief, in Jesus the Christ. Not everyone has that freedom. Paul is addressing that in his letter, and encouraging those who suffer on behalf of the gospel that they are united with Christ.

Yes, we are fortunate that we here today do not have that struggle. But the world, our nation, and our individual lives are filled with suffering. I, personally, don't enjoy suffering and I don't enjoy seeing others suffer. And I don't think of suffering itself as a privilege.

The privilege, is in knowing Christ. The privilege, is in trusting that Christ is present right there amid our suffering. There is joy in knowing that God is at work in the very midst of our suffering. But we often can't realize that at the time.

I often distinguish between happiness and joy, as it is so crucial to our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God. Happiness is a circumstantial feeling and brought about by external triggers. Joy is an internal state of being that comes from knowing who, and whose, we are. While we may not always feel happy, if we are in relationship with Christ, if we believe the good news, we will always have joy.

Paul tells the Philippians and tells us to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." We are to live our lives first and foremost as citizens of the kingdom of God and we are granted the privilege of sharing in the redemptive work of Christ.

How do we do that? By loving God and loving our neighbor. Not as a cheesy greeting card saying or a cliché inspirational quote, but as a way of life, with the very essence of our being. By extending ourselves to others and by hanging on tightly to God- and each other- during our own struggles, suffering and fear. By trusting that God is always at work, for God does some of God's best work in the worst of places and the worst of times.

Every day is an opportunity to live in the love of God and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is why Paul was able to rejoice. Though he was a Roman prisoner, he was freer than many of us. Freedom is not so much about our physical location as it is about our spiritual location. It is not so much about our circumstances as it is about our being.

There are prisons of society, of the body, of the mind... and Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians that we are called to freedom through a relationship with Jesus Christ. That we are called to proclaim the good news with our words, our actions, and with our very being.

We do live in very uncertain times. Tensions are high not only among nations, but within our own nation, and it just seems overwhelming. Yet we are not helpless. Every day we have the privilege of belonging to Christ, of rooting ourselves in that foundation, and of being a part of the gospel message. What could be better?

There may be suffering. There may be pain. There may be unhappiness. There may be disagreements. But there will also be rejoicing and unbridled joy. Joy in joining ourselves to the One above all others, who calls us to care, share, and love each other.

Any day we attach ourselves to Christ and strive to live out the gospel is a good day. And so we rejoice.

And today? Well, to add to the list of clichés: "It's a good day for a good day." Amen.