

DON'T WORRY, BE JOYFUL

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

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TEXT: Philippians 4:6 “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to claim the joy made available to us through a relationship with God in Christ which remains strong and steady no matter what may be happening in our lives and our world.

The title of my sermon today is, “Don’t Worry, Be Joyful.” When you saw that, how many of you started humming the “ooh-ooh-ooh” part of Bobby McFerrin’s 1988 hit, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”? I have to tell you, that tune has been an earworm in me ever since I started thinking about my message today. An earworm, by the way, refers to any song or tune that grabs you and won’t let you go. Before this week, I’d never paid much attention to the verses of McFerrin’s song. They tell some pretty sad stories: you lost your job, you can’t pay the rent, you’re totally out of money. I wouldn’t know how to be happy if I was facing trouble like that, but I agree with McFerrin when he sings, “In your life expect some trouble, when you worry you make it double.” I must confess that hearing the song in my head this week helped to lift my spirits.

But I’m still worried, worried about way too many things. I have at least a half dozen different but related worries about the election. I’m worried about the impact of the coronavirus, as well as the impact that the measures to reduce its spread are having on so many people’s lives. I’m worried about our vitality as a church, and our ability to gather the resources we need for sustaining our ministry. I’m worried about the kind of world we are passing along to our children and our grandchildren. I’m worried about some people I know who are having a rough go of it these days, some for health reasons, some because our world’s massive troubles are getting to them. Maybe my worries are your worries; probably you have some of your own.

Saint Paul said that the Christians in the city of Philippi should “not worry about anything.” How nice. Now that we’ve been told not to worry, we can just let go of all those concerns. I wish I had read his guidance a few months ago, so I could have gotten on the “don’t worry” bandwagon earlier. But Paul was not just offering a first century version of “Don’t worry, be happy.” After telling us not to worry, Paul told us what to do with the things that worry us: “In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests to be made known to God.” Often, Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible known as *The Message* has a wonderful way of unpacking the meaning of a passage. Here’s how he translates

that verse: “Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns.” Okay, so let me try praying the way I hear Paul urging: *“Dear God, I am worrying about so many things. Here’s what on top of my worry bucket today. (Insert worry here.) But I lift up these worries in a spirit of gratitude, because I know that you are truly in charge of everything, and that you pay attention to our prayers, and that you are already working for good in my life and in the world I know you love.”*

That’s a prayer which would come easily on day one. But what if I see no evidence that God is doing something about my concern? How do I continue to pray with thanksgiving, week after week, maybe month after month, when I see no reason to be thankful? And how am I supposed to be happy instead of being worried if my reason for worrying remains unchanged?

This is where I think Bobby McFerrin got it wrong. Happiness is dependant on what happens; joy isn’t. We are happy when our fortunes change for the good, when problems are solved, when pandemics have run their course. Joy is not at all dependant on what happens. Joy is an inner disposition which depends, not on our circumstances, but on a settled confidence that God really is in charge.

Since before I began ministry at the South Newbury Union Church, our bulletins have featured a reflection at the top of the order of service. The one I offered this week is a portion of a quotation from Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic who, long before I was there, was a professor of philosophy at the college I attended, Haverford College in Pennsylvania. Here’s the entire quote, which I found in a book of quotations: “Joy is not a thing of moods, not a capricious emotion, tied to fluctuating experiences. It is a state and condition of the soul. It survives through pain and sorrow and, like a subterranean spring, waters the whole life. It is intimately allied and bound up with love and goodness, and so is deeply rooted in the life of God.” The poet Wendell Berry offers the short version of this idea when he wrote, in my all-time favorite poem, titled “The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” “Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.”¹

That is the nature of Christian faith. The facts of our times invite resignation.

¹The Mad Farmer Liberation Front, by Wendell Berry. <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

What good is it to exert energy trying to turn things around when we know that there are immensely powerful forces engaged in making sure that what's going on benefits them? That's a question to be taken up in another sermon, one which presents evidence that grassroots efforts to secure peace and justice actually do leverage change for the better. This sermon is about worry and joy. Joy, as Wendell Berry said, is not impacted by the facts. Joy, as Rufus Jones said, is deeply rooted in the life of God. Joy does not protect us from the forces which worry us. Joy is the inner chemistry which converts worries into prayers, and which fuels gratitude for what God has done and is doing.

However, it appears that joy is not a condition which installs itself in our souls. It appears that joy needs to be invited, and then cultivated. In the passage we heard from the letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Phil 4:4) Paul is giving his readers an *instruction*, not a statement of what already is true, but a directive about what needs to be true. It's the same with our opening and closing hymns— both songs instruct us to rejoice- the first one, to rejoice just for the sake of rejoicing, and the last one, to rejoice because the Lord is king, because God is in charge. So how do we invite and then cultivate true joy? Berry is right: joy requires us to consider all the facts. Joy is not an escape from the mess around us, not a disregard of the suffering and oppression and brokenness that is the story of the world. It is, rather, a way of attending to the pain of the world which evokes compassion, and which abides in hope grounded in God's sovereign rule over all that is.

Later on in the passage from the Philippians we heard this morning, Paul urged his readers to "think about" whatever is true, honorable, just, and pure, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent and worthy of praise. (Phil.4:8) I read that instruction as a strategy for cultivating joy. If we are continually focusing our attention on what's wrong with our lives and with the world, how can we be cultivating a soul filled with joy? If we are continually awash in worries, chronically frightened by the possibility that bad situations might get worse, how will we find nourishment for the joy we want for our souls? So there's a delicate balance here which I am sure can only be sustained by the grace of God. We take the facts into account, but we don't let them consume us. We pay attention to all that's good and praiseworthy, but we don't ignore what is wrong, and we find joy as we participate in efforts to right those wrongs. This involves work, spiritual work, what Heather this morning called *heart work*. Joy isn't a one-time installation in a

welcoming soul. Living joyfully calls for regular nourishing of our inner life. Of course that involves prayer, prayer that takes our worries and troubles to God, prayer that renews our confidence in God's power to heal and make new, prayer that moves us to action, prayer that assures us that our actions make a difference for good. Joy doesn't claim that the things we're worried about aren't worrisome. The troubles of our lives, the suffering of our world, are not magically removed once our joy is fully operational. Joy instills confidence that God's purposes are being worked out, no matter how overwhelming the challenges might seem in any given moment, and no matter how long it takes for God's vision to be realized.

As I have developed this sermon this week, I have wracked my brain for a useful example of the difference joy makes in response to worry. I couldn't think of how joy impacted my own response to things that worry me, mostly because I'm pretty sure my joy still needs more nourishment. What finally came to mind is my experience of our partners in Zimbabwe. Lindy and I have had the privilege of visiting there twice, once in 2007 and again in 2015. Both times, the troubles the people were experiencing were overwhelming to us – massive inflation, 80% unemployment, a corrupt and self-serving government, the impact of unjust economic policies and a multi year drought. Even so, their worship was filled with joy – joy just because they were together, joy whose source is their trust in God, joy that fueled a steady commitment to doing what could be done to take care of each other. Their joy fit Rufus Jones' description to a 't' – it was like a subterranean spring, watering the whole of life. It was clearly allied and bound up with love and goodness, and it certainly flowed from a deep connection to God. One on one, our friends would discuss the dreadful state their country was in, but when they gathered, they were all about lifting each other's spirits, and rejoicing in response to God's goodness and mercy.

That's how a community of faith works. It is the gas station where our joy is fueled. It is the network of friends in Christ who are all about encouraging each other. It is the place which helps us turn our worries into prayer. It is the launch pad from which we can be moved to action to do what we can to address our troubles and the world's wrenching pain. Finally, it is the place where we experience joy that is more infectious than any virus, a place where, even while we are practicing social distancing to reduce the spread of the virus, we can practice spiritual intimacy as we honor each other's worries and nourish each others joy.