

***“Rejoice”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**February 3, 2019**

**First Scripture Reading: Psalm 150**

- <sup>1</sup>Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!  
<sup>2</sup>Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!  
<sup>3</sup>Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!  
<sup>4</sup>Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!  
<sup>5</sup>Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!  
<sup>6</sup>Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

**Second Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.



**Sermon: *“Rejoice”***

The first thing that I remember learning growing-up in the church is that I am a child of God and that God loves me no matter what. The second is that being a child of God means having joy in your life. Before I learned to read the Bible or pray, I learned to sing. Many of you probably did, too. And some of the first songs I was ever taught were songs about joy. Sing with me if you were taught them, too...

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.  
Where? Down in my heart!  
Where? Down in my heart!  
I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.  
Down in my heart to stay!

If you're happy and you know it clap your hands (Clap! Clap!)  
If you're happy and you know it clap your hands (Clap! Clap!)  
If you're happy and you know it then your face will surely show it.  
If you're happy and you know it clap your hands (Clap! Clap!)

This is the day (this is the day),  
That the Lord has made (that the lord has made)  
I will rejoice (I will rejoice),  
And be glad in it (and be glad in it)!

This is the day that the Lord has made! I will rejoice and be glad in it!  
This is the day (this is the day), that the Lord has made!

Joy. Because of God's love. Joy because of God's victory over death and the grave. Joy because of God's presence with us. Joy is an important part of the Christian experience and we are taught that this is so from the time we were... knee-high to a grasshopper. But there's something I didn't learn about being a Christian until I had been one for a while. Every day is not necessarily filled with joy.

I learned that lesson the hard way. When I was about 15 or so, I decided to accept Christ into my heart and be a Christian. Never mind that I had been baptized and confirmed in my Presbyterian Church years before. Never mind that I had been a believer ever since I could remember. My friends, many of them good ole Southern Baptists, had told me that whatever I had been doing before didn't include praying Jesus into my heart so it didn't count and that's why I wasn't happy. They told me that if I would just ask Jesus into my heart that my life would be filled with joy and happiness . . . *all the time*.

And because, well, who doesn't want to be happy all the time, I decided one Sunday morning to pray the prayer and ask Jesus to come into my life. Again, ignoring the fact that he was already there; so, I prayed. But a few weeks after that, I noticed that even though I had earnestly prayed, and really believed in Jesus, my life was still not the 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, joy-fest I had been led to believe it would become.

I was still tall and gangly and awkward. I still had a six dollar haircut and couldn't talk to girls if I was on fire and needed one to call the fire department. I was still anxiety ridden over school work and just fitting in ... you know, like most 15-year-olds. Where was all the joy I had been promised?

Reflecting back, I think that lots of people have similar experiences. Paul writes about rejoicing, but Paul never had a mortgage to pay or an elderly parent to care for or an autistic child to raise. Paul never had to work two or three jobs just to provide for his family or work through marital problems or survive high school as a 15-year-old for that matter. Certainly, Paul had issues of his own (remember, he was writing his letter to the Philippians *from prison*) but he had no clue what life for Christians would be like two millennia after he wrote this. And frankly, sometimes being joyful in this modern era is a tall order.

Except that's not really what Paul says. If we read his words carefully, we notice that Paul does not tell us that being a Christian *requires* us to be happy when we're not. Being a Christian doesn't mean taking a Pollyanna, "Don't-Worry-Be-Happy" approach to life.

Paul doesn't tell the Philippians to *be joyful*. He tells them to *rejoice* and that is a subtly different thing. "Joyful" is an adjective that describes a state of being. How do you feel? Joyful. "Rejoice" is an imperative; a command. What shall I do? Rejoice! In this case, Paul says rejoice in the Lord.

When we rejoice in the Lord, we reflect on and take delight in God's presence; we take delight in the things God is doing and has done for us; we celebrate that this thing we must endure does not get the final word because God is more powerful than the things we fear most. Paul is here reminding the Philippians that no matter what, they always have something to celebrate. Rather than letting the difficulties of life overwhelm them, they must take the time to consider the ways in which God has been good to them and the ways that they experience God's presence *with* them.

For most of us, joy is dependent upon people and things exterior to ourselves. We find joy in our work, in our friends and family, in the accomplishments of our children, in our hobbies. But if a friend or family member or even a stranger is mean to you, it can bring you down for hours. If the Buckeyes lose a game, many of you will be in a foul mood for days if not weeks afterward. And for some folks, our political

environment is an ongoing source of frustration and anger. Criticism, failure, rejection, anxiety, all of that can sap us of our joy.

But we can still rejoice.

While people and things can be enjoyable and bring us happiness, the source of our life and of all goodness is God. And God's grace and mercy, and steadfast love can never be taken away from us. Even when we struggle, even when we walk through "the valley of the shadow of death," we know that God goes with us. And for that reason, no matter how difficult life gets; no matter how acrimonious, no matter how rage-inducing, no matter how anxious, the disciple of Jesus Christ can always rejoice in the Lord, celebrating the ways in which God has been, and continues to be, present and active in our lives. And with a firm and certain knowledge that in the end, if not before, God's will **will** be done.

You see, we all suffer difficulties. We all endure tragedies. We all face challenges we would just as soon not have to face. But if we let those difficulties and tragedies and challenges define us, then our lives can never be fully what God intends for us. So, in the midst of those valleys, when the day is darkest, those are the times we have to remind ourselves of the goodness and light with which God has blessed us.

In Pat Conroy's novel *The Prince of Tides*,<sup>1</sup> the main character, Tom Wingo, reflects on the tragic circumstances of his own life; and they were pretty tragic. At one point he says "There are families who live out their entire lives without a single thing of interest happening to them. I've always envied those families." But he was wrong about that. Like him, I used to believe that most people lived lives that were mundane and ordinary, if not "exceptional" - whatever those words mean; that tragedy and difficult circumstances only touch a few people. I believed that the people who struggled with difficulties in life were the exceptions to the rule.

But since I've been a pastor, I've come to discover that we all have something with which we struggle. We all have some difficulty in our lives, it's just that some of us are better at hiding it than others.

Debt, bad test results, the death of a family member, losing a job - those are things that take away something important, a source of joy and energy. And as such, those losses can cloud our vision and obscure the goodness of God all around us. When life becomes difficult it can be hard to see God with us and it can be hard to recognize God's goodness. ***But when a thing is hardest to see, that's the time when we must put the most effort into finding it.***

So, when we are sad, it's okay to feel sad. When we are angry, it's okay to feel angry. It's okay to feel what we feel and to be honest about those feelings. But, we are not defined by fear and anger and sadness. Because as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ, it is the blessings of God, the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God that defines us. And in that we can rejoice!

Part of being a disciple is acknowledging and celebrating God's goodness. That's what it means to rejoice in the Lord. Not that we are expected to always be happy; not that we must force a smile when we don't feel joyful, but that we trust in God who is always with us, always loving us, and who always desires the best for us.

No matter what, we can rejoice. Because of God's love. Because of God's victory over death and the grave. Because of God's presence with us.

I have a pastor friend who always opens worship by saying that “God is good” to which his congregation replies, “all the time. “And all the time...” he says, and they reply “God is good.” It’s an old tradition with roots in the African-American church but it speaks to what Paul is saying here.

God is good... (congregation replies “all the time!”)  
And all the time... (congregation replies “God is good!”)

And in that we can rejoice.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

#### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Conroy, Pat. *The Prince of Tides*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. Print.