

Philippians 4:1-9

South Plains

October 12, 2008

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Rejoicing When We Don't Feel Like It

Christians can be irritating sometimes. You ask a simple question, "How are you?" And, the reply is a flood of exuberant optimism that can be hard to take when I'm having a bad day. The Bible sometimes makes the same demands on my tolerance. St. Paul (and because he is a saint, I can't complain too loudly), St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Isn't it a little unrealistic to tell people to rejoice *always*? Even when the stock market is down or when the kids are unhappy or the septic field is stopped up? As if to rub salt in the wound, Paul adds, "Again I will say, Rejoice." It can be irritating to have someone tell us we ought to be rejoicing when we don't feel like it.

To prove my point, consider the circumstances of this letter to the Philippians. First of all, Paul is writing from prison. He's in jail as an enemy of the state for goodness sake. That's no reason to rejoice. Nevertheless, he tells his friends in Philippi that some real good has come from his troubles. The whole imperial guard and everyone else knows "that my imprisonment is for Christ (1:13)," he writes in the first chapter.

That's cheeky, although I suppose it's typical missionary speak to see the silver lining in every cloud.

Last week we got a letter from Dr. Sue Makin, a Presbyterian missionary in Malawi who works as an obstetrician in a hospital where she is training African assistants as she works. Recently she visited the maternity ward and found a 33 year old woman who had just delivered her seventh child at home. The day after she delivered, this mother walked miles to the hospital carrying her newborn, asking for a tubal ligation so she could stop having babies. There was no nurse available, so Dr. Makin found two attendants and the three of them did the surgery under local anesthesia. The next day, the woman walked the seven miles back home carrying her baby. Dr. Makin concludes her letter with this incredibly optimistic statement: "What a privilege it is to be surrounded by clouds of Malawian faithful witnesses – as well as to be supported by Christians united in prayer around the world." It's hard to understand that optimism from missionaries living under difficult conditions.

The worst part, of course, is that Paul and Dr. Makin seem so sincere in this joy.

It's also hard for me to justify Paul's cheerful outlook when he is writing to a conflicted church. He tells the church in Philippi, "Be of the same mind.... Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (2:2, 4)." Toward the end of the letter in the passage we read this morning, he singles out two women who have been quarreling with each other in church. "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these

women (4:2-3).” How in the world does Paul expect the church to rejoice when their leaders are arguing with each other so openly that the whole church gets dragged in? That kind of optimism can be hard to take.

On the one hand, Paul identifies these quarrelsome women in a public letter that surely was read aloud in front of the whole community of faith. Imagine their embarrassment. And, on the other hand, he calls them his “co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (4:3).” That’s pretty bold confidence in the willingness of these women to take a public scolding and in the willingness of this church to put out that fire instead of fanning the flames of conflict. Settling that kind of trouble is painful; so why should the Philippians rejoice?

The only source of satisfaction and joy I see here is the comradeship of good work. Paul struggled with Euodia, Syntyche, Clement and all the other believers in Philippi in order to bring a church to life. From the tone of this letter, he seems to have invested more of himself emotionally in the Philippian people that with any other church. He wants to rejoice. I hope it’s not wishful thinking.

The other circumstance that makes joy problematic in Philippi is the opposition the church faced. We don’t know exactly what problems were plaguing that church. All we know is that they had enemies. Paul does not mince words. “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh

(3:2).” I don’t know how he expected them to rejoice with dogs and evil workers snapping at the heels of the church.

And, the good people of Philippi were not just worried about themselves. They worried about Paul himself, sitting in prison, unable to visit them or to go about his work. Part of the purpose of the letter is to reassure his friends in that church that he was all right. They had sent Paul money, so this epistle doubles as a thank you letter and a letter of encouragement. I guess that is one possible explanation for the upbeat tone of most of what Paul writes. He doesn’t want to sound like he’s whining about his own situation. But, still, “Rejoice always” is a little much.

Paul’s antidote for all these problems at Philippi is pretty simplistic. Maybe this is his prescription for joy: Advertise your gentleness. Remember the Lord is near. And, pray.

Now, I don’t have a problem with prayer, especially when the church is worried about trouble within the fellowship and enemies outside the fellowship. I’m just not sure how the rest of his medicine is going to help me rejoice. Take gentleness, for example. People who are gentle in this rough and tumble world are people who get hurt. I did find a translation that substitutes the word “reasonable.” “Let your reasonableness be known to all.” That’s a stronger character trait, although reasonable people may not always rejoice.

of rejoicing. I know the psalmist is able to do both things in the same psalm, although I'm not sure how. Many of the laments start with a complaint and end with a praise. Psalm 22 is the example that comes immediately to mind. Jesus quotes the opening line as he hangs on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The first half of that bitter poem continues in the same dark mood.

But, then the mood changes. Unaccountably. The psalmist sings, "You have rescued me.... Future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it (22:21, 30-31)." Now you tell me what happened in the psalmist's life to bring about that change of attitude from a sense of forsakenness to a sense of thanksgiving? We don't know. We only have the resulting paradox of pain and joy together.

One thing I have noticed however. The pain of grief can co-exist with joy. When our son's dog died, that loss threw him into a tailspin. For days, he was overcome with sadness. He would remember the fun they had together and that memory of joy would bring on the tears. He lived with this crazy contradiction of grief that longed for memories of a happier time, and those happy thoughts which brought him back to grieving, only to start the cycle over again.

Maybe Paul should have advised the Philippians, "Rejoice always and Cry always." I'm sure they had

Paul also advises them to remember that the Lord is near. That's easier said than done. We can take this advice in two ways. There's no doubt Paul expected Jesus to come back very soon. If he has in mind the second coming and the end of the age, it could be encouraging to remember that judgment is coming for your enemies. "The Lord is near" can be heard as saying, "Hang in there. The judge of history is going to settle your enemies hash any day now." That could be a reason to rejoice. But, it could also be a warning to us all.

The other way we can understand that advice is as a reminder that the Lord is always near to support us and help us and protect us. We're never alone. That's a real comfort in times of trouble. Whether it's a reason to rejoice depends on how much comfort we're willing to receive.

Finally, Paul tells the Philippians to pray: "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God (4:6)." Prayer is the one important avenue to joy. Even this advice, however, can be puzzling if not a source of irritating frustration. We are told not only to pray and to make supplications (in other words to ask God for help), but also to include thanksgiving in our prayers.

It's hard to give thanks when we are in trouble and needing help; because giving thanks is just another way

plenty to cry about. Apparently they had a deeper spring of joy in Christ.

Well, now you've heard about my irritation for the week. Rejoice always, if you can. The Bible is full of paradoxes I will never understand completely. Rejoice anyway.