

SERMON
By: Gail Fricker

“Be Joyful!”

September 9, 2018

Philippians 4:4-9

“Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, Rejoice.” (verse 4)

What a powerful command Paul gives us. But what does it mean?

The Webster dictionary defines ‘Rejoice’ as

“to feel, or to show great joy or delight.”

Umm – great joy or delight!

The dictionary also gives synonyms of rejoice – I’m going to need the children’s help to for these:

(Children pick up words and congregation call out the words)

happiness, pleasure, joy, gladness, elation, jubilation, exuberance, exultation, celebration, revelry, merrymaking!

Those are pretty exciting words! And maybe they are words that we don’t often think about when we are talking about church, or about our faith in God.

(children return to seats)

It is easy to think about being happy, or joyful, and full of pleasure when you are relaxing on vacation. I can tell you it was pretty easy for me to ‘rejoice’ when I was sitting in the hammock at the cottage. And yes, there was perhaps some ‘merrymaking’ and maybe a little ‘celebration’ as we splashed in the water. Maybe some of you felt the same as you were sitting at your pool, or on your deck, relaxing, ‘happy’ and enjoying the ‘pleasure’ of summer.

But now that we have come back to our more everyday living. Back to school. Back to work.

Back to routines. Maybe even back to some stress already – and perhaps we find ourselves pining for those days of relaxation.

Perhaps we find it a little difficult to ‘rejoice’ as we are busy getting children ready for school in the morning, or we are trying to meet deadlines at work.

And as we get back into the routines around us, we also become more aware of the world around us. I know when I am on vacation, I almost tune out from the world, and I enjoy a time of no internet, and no news. But now that I am back I am bombarded with emails, and news stories full of injustices, pain and grief.

It is hard to ‘rejoice’ when there is so much sadness and injustice around us.

Happiness almost feels like a sin while others suffer.

How can we rejoice while others starve, are homeless, or face abuse and suffering? It feels wrong.

But we should remember that Paul was likely writing this letter to the Philippians from a prison cell. He knew about injustice and pain. He was quite possibly facing execution. If anyone had reason not to be joyful, it was Paul. But still, in the middle of injustice, he found reasons for joy, and he gave the command:

“Rejoice in the Lord”

Let's look at this closely.

Does it say to rejoice in our circumstances?

Does it say to rejoice in the abundance of the things around us?

No, it clearly states to rejoice ***in the Lord!***

It clearly puts the focus on our relationship with God.

That is the very reason to rejoice! When we begin to look for God at work in the spiritual sightings all around us and in our lives, then we 'rejoice in the Lord.'

But, rejoicing ***in the Lord*** does not mean that we will never be depressed or sad.

It's interesting that the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is in 1 Thess. is: "*Rejoice always*" (1 Thess.5:16)

The shortest verse in the English New Testament in John 11, verse 35 is: "Jesus wept". They are not contradictory!

Jesus could weep and yet have the fullness of joy, even as He faced the cross – because his joy came from his loving relationship with God.

And we too can be happy and rejoice, even though we weep for those that suffer; even when we feel our own pain and grief; even when things seem mundane, routine or hard for us. And we can do this because our joy also comes from our relationship with God.

"Rejoice in the Lord."

And what about the word "*Always!*"

You know, I have to admit that sometimes I wish that Paul had been more realistic and had said, "Rejoice most of the time"! But if he had said that, most of us would be able to justify ourselves by saying, "Usually I rejoice."

If it was just 'rejoice sometimes'

Then, we would be content to rejoice just when we are on vacation;

we wouldn't have to confront our grumbling and complaining when things don't seem to go our way;

we wouldn't have to acknowledge our lack of trust in God when we are faced with difficulties;

or our anger when we're treated unfairly;

our disappointment when people let us down;

or, to be honest, our lack of faith when we feel that God has let us down.

But Paul clearly commands us to "*Rejoice always.*"

And Paul deliberately repeats the command for emphasis. You have to know that whenever something is repeated in scripture, it is not accidental. It is like a flashing red light saying; pay attention to this...don't miss it! This is very important.

The command is to rejoice not just sometimes, not just when we feel like it, not just when things are going great, but "always!"

Does this mean that we will walk around with a perpetual smile on our faces?

(Demonstrate) We'd look kind of goofy if we did!

Does it mean that we will never experience sadness or grief?

Does it mean that we are to stoically endure our trials and ignore how much we hurt?
Absolutely not!

What Paul commands here is not just a cheerful disposition, not just a happy face, but rather something that requires an intervention with the Divine – it is joy *in the Lord*.

The Psalms are helpful in this regard. The psalmist often writes about overwhelming feelings of despair or sadness. He never puts on a happy face; never denies the intensity of the troubles. But in the process of crying out to God for help and re-focusing his thoughts on the Divine, his mood changes even though his circumstances are no different.

The psalmist often experiences a flood of God's joy even when experiencing tremendous pain.

Paul commands us to keep our faith and relationship with God, and to rejoice in this relationship even in times of difficulties.

We are commanded to always seek God in every situation. To look for the ways that God's Spirit is at work. The Spiritual Sightings. Because then – we can rejoice.

I have asked Frank to share with us briefly an experience he has had of seeing God at work, and experiencing joy in difficult times.

(Frank share story)

Thanks Frank.

It is good to hear how God is at work. In the weeks ahead, I want to encourage you to look for Spiritual Sightings around you during your weeks. Things that make you want to rejoice! To be happy, to celebrate, to be merry, to be full of joy, and jubilation! And – when we feel that – then it makes us want to share that joy with others.

That is why we gather to celebrate here at Knox.

That is why we choose to serve in ways that will allow others to know the joy that can come from being in relationship with God.

At the end of today's scripture, Paul tells us to "put into practice what ever we have learned or received." (verse 9)

I know that many of you put into practice and share the joy you have with others in so many different ways. We are a busy church, doing God's work with joy!

Today, I want to celebrate the work that many of you do among us during worship here at Knox, and I want us to commission you for your year ahead.

And so, I begin by inviting forward those that have been called to serve as teachers with Adventurers with God, and also ask the children that they teach come forward, and while they come forward, let us all sing together "Lord Prepare Me To Be A Sanctuary."