

“Thank God for Joy”

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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Well it's the middle of October. Halloween's just around the corner. And maybe that's why all this week I've been haunted by some words. The words were first spoken C.S. Lewis almost 70 years ago. But ever since the words have been haunting Christians. And this week Lewis' words have been haunting me.

"It seems," Lewis said, "it seems that God finds our desires in life, not too strong, but too weak. We're half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy's being offered us."

Now you have to admit. That's a haunting thought, isn't it? I mean what if Lewis is right? What if what we call joy is only part, maybe just a small part of something much bigger? What if there really is such a thing as infinite joy? And what if it's really being offered to us? Would you take it?

And the reason I ask is because I think Paul took it. And I think his prayer in Philippians 1 shows that he took it. "I thank my God every time I remember you," Paul writes, "in all my prayers, for all of you, I always pray with joy ..."

You know I walked into a store a while ago. I was thirsty. I was looking for something to drink. I wanted something healthy, so I started looking at bottled juice. And one particular bottle caught my eye. The label said, "Blueberry Pomegranate, 100 percent juice, all natural." And the picture on the label was a picture of a ripe pomegranate spilling its exotic, glistening seeds onto a pile of fat, juicy blueberries.

I picked up the bottle. I smiled. I was almost sold. But then I turned the bottle around and read the ingredients list: "Filtered water, pear juice concentrate, apple juice concentrate, grape juice concentrate." But where were the blueberries. Where was the pomegranate? Finally I found them. They were listed as number five and number seven in a list of nine ingredients, after something mysteriously called "other natural flavors."

Now by law, manufacturers are required to list the ingredients in their products in descending order by weight. That means a product contains the greatest

proportion of the first ingredient on the list and successively less of each ingredient moving down the list. So according to the list on the label, the bottle I was holding in my hand held mostly water and other juices, with just enough blueberry and pomegranate juice for flavor and color.

I put the bottle back. But as I did, a thought occurred to me. What if our lives are like the bottle? What if my life, your life: what if they had ingredients listed on them? Would joy be listed as one of the main ingredients of your life? And if not, how far down the list do you think it would be? How many other things in your life this morning are trying to mask the fact that joy isn't as much a part of your life as you'd like it to be?

Only you know the answer to that question of course. But what I is this. If you want to move joy further up the list of the main ingredients in your life, there is a way. And the apostle Paul is trying to show you the way in the opening lines of his prayer in Philippians. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ..."

And then Paul tells us very clearly the reason for his joy. It's because of a partnership, because Paul says, "of your partnership in the gospel."

Now whenever you mention the word "partnership" it's important to go on and define it. Who are the principals in the "partnership?" What's the basis of the "partnership?" Is it a full "partnership" or a limited one? And since those questions are important to answer when you talk about any "partnership" let's go ahead and try to answer them when it comes to the one that Paul's trying to tell us about.

Who are the principals in this partnership? Actually that's a great question to ask because the truth is we usually think the partners in this relationship are only the two visible ones: Paul and the Philippians. But the truth is there's another principal involved. There's an "invisible partner." And it's the presence of this "invisible partner" that's the real reason for the joy that's associated with this "partnership." And although Paul doesn't mention the name in verse 5, he gives us a big clue to the identity of the invisible partner in verse 6.

I'm confident, he says there, confident that "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." So who is it who began a good work "in" the Philippians, not "with" the Philippians but "in" them? And who is it who's going to keep on working to bring it to completion?

Well the truth is we don't need to keep ourselves in suspense about it. The "invisible partner" in the partnership is the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who began a good work in the Philippians when they first heard the gospel. It's the Holy Spirit who caused them to trust what they heard. It's the Holy Spirit who caused them to give their lives to Christ. And it's the Holy Spirit who will keep on working inside them to bring their commitment to Christ to completion when at last their faith becomes sight.

The Holy Spirit is the invisible partner in the lives of the Philippians and of Paul and of every other person who's accepted Christ as their Savior. And what kind of joy can it bring to someone to know that you have an "invisible partnership" with the Holy Spirit in your life? Well listen to the testimony of Paul. You'll find it tucked away in two sentences in the middle of Philippians 2 in verses 18 and 19. The setting though is almost as important as the sentences.

So let me give you some details about the setting. In fact, I'll do better than that. I'll let an archaeologist tell you about the setting. John McRay holds a doctoral degree in archaeology from the University of Chicago. Listen to how he describes the Roman prison that Paul probably was living in when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. "Most cells were dark. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from a few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable."

And in a cell like the one described by Professor McRay Paul writes back to his friends in the church at Philippi. He tells them that some people have been trying to add to his discomfort. They've been trying Paul says "to stir up trouble for me while I am in chains."

Then he writes, " But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way ... Christ is preached. And because of that I rejoice. Yes, and I'll continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what's happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

So did you hear it? Did you hear Paul mention the name of the "invisible partner?" Because it's there. Listen again to the first part of verse 19. I'll read it to you slowly this time so you won't miss it.

"I'll continue to rejoice," Paul writes, "for I know that through your prayers" (that's Paul's reference to his visible partners, the Philippians); "through your prayers," he says and through God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus

Christ ..." And there it is. There's the name of the invisible partner that enables Paul to rejoice, even in a dark cold Roman prison cell.

It's the presence and the sense of partnership that we have with the Holy Spirit that brings Paul joy. And the same presence, the same partnership, the same joy is offered to every believer. Every one of us can experience the same joy that Paul felt if (and it's a real "if" so listen carefully now) ... if we take time to remember that in all the experiences of our lives, we always have partners. We are never alone. We have visible partners in our Christian friends. And we have an invisible partner in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So tell me, do you live your life as a "partnership" or are you trying to do it as "sole proprietor." Because I can tell you it makes a difference.

A few years ago, on *The Today Show*, they did a short story, an expose really on "the happiness industry." Turns out there are, (or at least there were ... I don't know if the company is still in existence or not), but at least at the time of the story there were people who, for a fee, would give you a contract and guarantee they could make you happy.

And one morning, one of those people came walking out on to the set of *The Today Show*. "I'd like to be your happiness coach," he said to Maria Shriver. "I can teach you how to be happy. In fact, I can teach almost anyone how to be happy. You just have to make a decision not to take on all the crap the world gives you. You have to decide to be happy."

And as I watched, I thought to myself. Oh, if it was only that easy. But the truth is, it isn't. We can't manufacture our own happiness, at least not for very long. But the problem is happiness can't be consistently produced by a sole proprietor. You need to have partners, partners that can help you.

And Paul is trying to teach us this morning that we need to have two kinds of partners. We need to have visible human partners to produce joy more consistently in our lives. We need to share our lives with others. And we need to have an invisible partner. We need to learn how to share our life with the partner God offers us, our invisible partner, the Holy Spirit.

So let me ask you. How often in a typical day do you do that? How often do you take the time to remember your invisible partner in life? And if you'd like to get better at doing that, here are some things you can do.

First you can start each day by taking time to remember, to consciously remember a verse that speaks to you about the person, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. A great verse to begin with is the verse in Galatians chapter 5 that talks about the "fruit" of the Spirit. The "fruit of the Spirit," Galatians says, "is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control."

John Stott, the great English preacher and writer once told me personally that he says those words to himself every morning. And when I asked him why he told me "To remind myself that I'm going to go through my day no matter what the day brings to me with a partner beside me, a partner completely dedicated and completely able to help me find joy in every part of my day."

"But in order to find that kind of joy," he told me I also do one more thing. "What's that," I asked him. "I pray," he answered. "I pray the prayer of Paul in Philippians chapter 1. I thank God for my partners in the gospel and I pray that "He who began a good work in me will bring it towards completion in my life that day. I pray to be led and guided in all that I do and all that I say by the person of the Holy Spirit, my invisible partner. For only in that way will I will able to sustain my strength and my joy."And if you have ever seen a picture of John Stott, you will know one fact about him. He almost always has a smile on his face. And now you know why. Let's pray ...