

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-18a

Sermon Title: "Joy beyond Circumstance"

Rev. Josh Fitterling

As I begin today, I would like to share with you again a few of Paul's words that we heard this morning to the church members in Philippi from our reading today. "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart." Powerful words of thanksgiving which begin this letter. Words that have such a tone of hope – a tone of joy about them. Words that may not seem possible coming from someone in the situation that Paul was in. For at the time of writing this letter, Paul was in prison. Yet, despite his current situation, he seems to have found joy. Despite being in prison for what he believes in, he seems hopeful. And so today I want to talk a little bit about finding joy and hope, regardless of our circumstances.

As many of you already know, when I was in college, my initial ambition was to become a math teacher. And so, for my first 3 years of college, this was my pursuit – 3 years of time, 3 years of energy, 3 years of money toward this goal. As the 4th year began, I started my student teaching semester, working with a local high school teacher and her 7 classes. And it was there when it started to become clear to me that being a math teacher was not what I was called to do. By halfway through the semester, my stress level was through the roof, I was experiencing depression and I wasn't eating, I wasn't taking care of myself. I was doing the work, but I wasn't happy, I wasn't healthy, I wasn't whole. And I felt trapped – I had spent all this time, energy, and money toward a career that I now came to realize was not my calling in life. I was in my own little emotional prison of sorts and, I'll admit, unlike Paul I found it very hard to find joy or to feel hopeful in the circumstances I found myself.

Yet, joy and hope found me. You see, my cooperating teacher, Ms. Barto and I had a wonderful connection. She knew that I was struggling and that I wasn't sure if I would finish the semester or not. She could see the prison that I was in as I tried to figure out what came next. She also knew that in the midst of it all I was sensing a calling to ministry - we were able to talk about that too. And so one morning before any students had arrived for the day, Ms. Barto came over to my desk. And she handed me a pin - a pin that I wear on my stole today in honor of her. The pin bears the word hope. And I honestly can't remember what she said to me when she gave it to me, but I know what that pin and that act of caring meant to me - it gave me the courage to leave student teaching and begin my pursuit of ministry. It reminded me that even when faced with the unknowns and uncertainties of the future, there is always hope, even if we can't see it. I couldn't...but she could and she reminded me of hope. I know that I felt joy for the first time in several weeks as I held that pin and all of a sudden, through that simple and profound gift, I was free.

From time to time, we all have our very own prisons that we live in. Sure it may not be a physical place like the prison of Paul, but rather an emotional or mental one - prisons of the heart. A place where we feel trapped. A place where we encounter the unknown. An uncomfortable place that we long to be freed from but perhaps we don't know how to get there. In those moments, can we be like Paul and find the joy? Can we find the hope? I think the tradition of Paul's time of beginning a letter with thanksgiving might not be a bad way for us to approach life in general. Even in the hardest and most challenging moments of life, what are we thankful for? And in some of the darkest times, thanksgivings may be hard to come by but grab even the smallest ones and rejoice. Still can't think of something? Look at the people sitting around you - we are surrounded by reasons to be thankful for we are in a community that cares about us. And it is amazing how when we start listing the things we are thankful for, and focus

on those things, joy comes in. And with the arrival of that joy, hope isn't too far behind. Hope that allows us to face our challenges and to make it through.

Now maybe you are not in that type of place today and rather you are in a place where thanksgivings flow easily, joy abounds, and hope resounds, perhaps your call is like that of Ms. Barto's - to extend words of hope and joy to those who are struggling. Because when we can share hope and joy, we share one of the most powerful gifts. As I cherish this pin, cherish Ms. Barto's kindness, cherish the hope she offered me, I realize how powerful of a gift she gave me. What a difference a little joy and hope, regardless of our circumstances, can make in our lives.

In just a few moments, we will once again be celebrating Holy Communion together and as we do, I would like for us to consider what is happening in these moments as we remember the Lord's Supper. For first we are invited to this meal to remember and to experience once more God's grace. To feel the love of Jesus, to commune with our God and with one another, to receive renewed strength, renewed hope, renewed joy. And then we go forth from the table and if this is a day you are struggling with your own pain, carry all the hope and joy that you possibly can with you to sustain you and get you through. And if you leave here and your cup runneth over, if you have more hope, and joy, and strength then you know what to do with, share it out into the world. Because you may just be the answer to some prayers. You may be the joy that get someone else through the challenging times. And for all of these things, I say thanks be to God! Amen.