

"Start Spreading the (Good) News"

Rev. Roberta, Lawrence Park Community Church

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Romans 15:4-13

In many ways, this reading feels like the last one we should be using to explore joy. Paul is writing this letter from inside prison. The Christian church is still fledgling, and is threatened to be crushed by the larger Roman and Jewish authorities alike at really any minute. And yet, he says "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." Be not afraid, as the angel tells Mary, and the Sheppards, and Jesus tells everyone in his ministry. Have no fear, only joy in your heart.

Paul tells his readers to rejoice. Rejoice, you Gentiles (you non-Christians), and extol God! That is a big ask in these times. Paul was certainly not dealing with anything better than we are today, in fact he was encountering even more fear and anger than I would argue a lot of us here today experience. And yet, he proclaims we must rejoice.

Paul always needs a bit of context before we get too deep into the weeds.

Paul was a Jewish citizen of Rome, who helped the Pharisee leaders persecute these new Jewish communities who were insisting they had found the Messiah, called Jesus. He is blinded in a vision on the road, and 3 days later has his sight restored. Through this quite literal "come to Jesus" moment, he becomes the most fervent supporter of the Church. He helps establish and grow churches across the ancient near east, telling both Jewish communities and non-Jewish (aka Gentile) ones that Christ is the Son of God and their troubles will be over.

This goes over as well as one would expect. Prominent Jewish leaders saw this man, yelling in their synagogues and temples about the Messiah, and because he would not stop, he was finally arrested and held in prison in Jerusalem, where he still wrote to churches across the region.

Jewish authorities could not have done any of this without the aid of Roman authorities. And considering the active arrest that Paul was under, I can understand why his letters have some animosity towards the then-powerful Jewish leaders who were determined to silence him, and hopefully wait for this Jesus nonsense to go away. However, this is also where we as a Christian church can go headfirst into an antisemitic spiral. This early conflict is a part of the spark that permitted Jewish persecution for millennia across the globe, including today. We need this context to know why Paul is so mad at the community that shunned him, even as he proclaims joy, not fear.

In many ways, Paul is our, if you pardon my stretch, Ebenezer Scrooge. Let us consult the ancient texts of A Christmas Carol, a story many of you know. Scrooge is considered a penny-pinching mean old man who treats everyone around him with contempt. He does not like anyone, and no one likes him. On Christmas Eve he is visited by 3 ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, who show him how he got this way, and where he will head if he doesn't change his ways. A "Come to Santa" conversion. Scrooge realizes he is afraid of connecting with anyone, because he lost so many when he was younger. It is better to shut them away, stay angry and afraid.

Instead, he tries joy.

Joy is a beautiful emotion. It is an emotion that evokes action. It is a feeling that can inspire you to do something, like dance or sing, or clap your hands in glee. It is also one that is not taken seriously, at least compared to our other Advent themes. Pray for world peace. Pray that all may experience hope. That all are comforted by God's love. But joy? What does joy have to do with it? If we think of the hierarchy of needs, which one is more important, shelter and food, or internal happiness?

And yet, joy is what we need, more than ever. It is an action emotion that allows us to repel fear. It is tied to meaning and purpose. When we see the children's pageant and their joy, we also feel that because they worked hard on something really cool and we can all experience that together. When we learn of good things in the world, it can give us joy to know that us trying, hoping and praying, is making a difference somewhere. And that we too can bring great joy to others. When there is fear that facism is rising, that the environment is being wrecked, that our work is in vain- joy keeps the spark going.

It is called sharing the Good News. Not the Neutral News or the Cautiously optimistic news. The Good News, the Gospel that Chirist is capable of uniting anyone and everyone and conquering even death itself. That God's love is able to be found in every being, no matter their circumstances. Even in a prison, Paul is able to find that tiny spark of Joy, that the Messiah is here, and is able to cherish and nurture that feeling.

Scrooge tried joy. He opened his door, he shared his glad tidings and good news of love with his employee, and it is clear he wants to try again. He is willing to risk being told to go away, because he is so full of joy for his new lease on life that the risk is worth it. Joy overcomes fear.

Paul could have easily pronounced it as fear. "Be afraid of God's wrath! Be afraid that everyone around you is doomed! Be afraid that our new church will fail, unless we work harder and fiercer." Fear works incredibly well, we have seen that time and time again. Fear allows us to close our doors because we don't feel safe. It allows us to say "we must take extra precautions", that include not allowing strangers near, or helping others in fear that we may be misused. Fear allows us to be insular and small and comforted that the world is burning but we are here, safe. It is not our fault that everyone out there is hurting, we are scared and staying here is safest.

Joy is the opposite. It forces the doors open, and brings in the weary and tired to its warmth. It encourages us to think bigger, not smaller. It offers us a way forward together, as opposed to alone. And it says that nothing is impossible.

Paul, Scrooge, and us are not so naive that we ignore the realities of the world. I will not ask you to invite a coyote into your home, or tell you to follow a stranger to their home because there is joy between you. What I am suggesting is that our weary world, encumbered by a fear that says "strike first", could greatly benefit from joy. The Good News, that Christ is on the way, and that death itself will be defeated, and that even in the depths of our despair, we are not alone, that is a joy that holds us tight.

God Bless Us, Every One, indeed.

Amen