

The Joy of Being Christ's Church 1: *Joy in Partnership*

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 47

¹Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.
²For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.
³He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. ⁴He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah ⁵God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet. ⁶Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. ⁷For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm. ⁸God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. ⁹The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

Philippians 1:1-11

From Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I 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. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Dorothy Bass is a church historian and practical theologian who has made a keen observation about this moment in the rhythm of the year. With summertime comings and goings largely behind us, today we stand on the doorstep of life as it gets back to normal again. We return to the rhythms of school and work, and a robust church program stretches out before us. Professor Bass notes that at this particular turn in the seasons, she finds herself reflective of fresh summer memories – retreats to the mountains or coast, freedom for children to roam and a simpler lifestyle - less organized by the clock, but more by the rising and setting of the sun and mealtimes in between. She asks, “Isn’t that the way it really ought to be all year long?”

However, “Back home, we jump right in; the kids are back to school and their playmates, while we adults return to jobs, to housework, to worship and friendship. But now,” she writes, “we are doing these good things in a divided fast-paced society. Work and play and prosperity get out of balance. Expectations coming from different parts of our lives conflict with one another... patterns of shared life are less coherent, less morally clear. We yearn for a richer, deeper understanding of what it means to live as Christians in a time when basic patterns of human relationship are changing all around us.” She goes on - In the summer we sense the glory of God in the beauty of nature, in the unhurried gathering of family and friends and the adventure of travel. But now, we want to know what God has to do with our work, with our relationships, with the way we raise our children, with public and political life and how we spend our time and money. Bass concludes: “This is the moment to think deeply about what it means to practice our faith.”¹

She’s right, you know. This is the moment to think deeply about what it means to practice our faith in the routine seasonal shift from summer into fall, and – more broadly - this is our moment to think deeply about

¹ Dorothy Bass, quoted and paraphrased for clarity from the preface of *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*.

being partners in the gospel in a season when we know that the role of the church as an institution in American culture is changing dramatically. This is also an opportune time, during the 150th Anniversary of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, to look back and give thanks, and to look forward and ask, *What next?* These are the themes we will be exploring in the coming weeks, and we have no better guide for it means to practice the faith together than the Apostle Paul.

Now, I chose Philippians as the text in this series, although I could have selected another. Romans would have allowed for some serious theological education but that felt more dull than celebratory for the anniversary. Either of the Letters to the Corinthians would have permitted a fair amount of tongue-lashing about the congregation's misbehavior, and admittedly that would have been more fun for me than for you! No, I chose Philippians because it is Paul's love letter to the church. There is more joy in this little letter than in any other biblical encouragement for being the Body of Christ. That felt appropriate for both the anniversary and for the time in which we live.

This summer, in my regular rhythms of reading, here are just a few of the headlines that came out in major newspapers and periodicals. These are titles of articles I collected:

-More than Half of U.S. Adults, Thirty Percent of Evangelicals Believe Jesus isn't God.

-The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church.

-My Sister Thinks Prayer Will Cure My Cancer. How Do I Talk to Her?

-America is Losing Religious Faith.

-Why Middle-Aged Americans Aren't Going Back to Church.

Friends, those are just a few articles from the top of a big stack collected over the summer! We who love the church and find that wonderful quality that Paul describes as "partnership in the gospel," are being called anew to think deeply about the church's ministry and mission.

I hope diving into Paul's Love Letter to the church will help us in this fall season!

Clearly the Philippian church occupied a special place in Paul's heart. There was a sense of belonging to that little congregation unlike any other – something unique, if undefined. It's not that Philippi was so tranquil a parish. Paul literally had to leave town to avoid persecution there. Nor was it that they supported him more than the churches at Ephesus, or Thessalonica, or Corinth; Paul boasted generous support for his mission was spread across those congregations. It was not that the Philippians were a more kindred congregation than others. Actually, it was the most eclectic, diverse assortment of converts that Paul encountered anywhere. With the information we have from his letters, I think we can assume that Paul's affinity with that particular congregation was similar to the way any one of us might feel in choosing our home church.

What is it - for any one of us - when we go to one church and feel right at home, or go to another and feel like an intruder, somewhat out of place? Oftentimes, you just can't put your finger on it – why you sense that a church is a good fit for you. Church evangelism experts say that apart from the perception that you are way off from a congregation's theological center, the primary reason a person returns to a church is because of hospitality. It's not the preaching or the music or the church program that will keep a visitor coming back. It is the feeling of welcome; of connecting with other people in a meaningful way; of experiencing the presence of God among the people who make up the community of faith. That's what Paul felt among the Philippians. It was apparently the closest thing he had to a home church.

I love the way he describes it, saying: *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.* Paul's Letter to the Philippians offers a graceful invitation for

us to consider how we exemplify this sharing, this joyful partnership in the gospel.

Now, lest we think that Paul is simply basking in the warm glow of a congregation that loves him, as he writes these words he is sitting in prison. His future looks bleak. And yet Paul overflows with thanksgiving, joy, and love for the people of that church. He lives out his difficult days in confidence knowing that wherever he is, the members of that congregation can be counted on to be his partners, to show forth the love and grace of God.

A pastoral colleague of mine drove into his church parking lot on a Saturday afternoon to prepare for a wedding that evening. The lot was empty except for one lone car facing the front of the sanctuary building with someone behind the wheel. Bob thought, “An early wedding guest perhaps?” It was actually a church member who had not been around for a while. He was a man in his fifties who had suffered the premature death of his sister to cancer about a year before. Then a few months later he had lost his job as a corporate vice-president when his company went through a major downsizing. He was sad, fearfully embarrassed, and angry. So, for nearly a year he had stopped coming to church, stopped volunteering on Habitat for Humanity workdays, stopped picking up his nametag and ushering on Sunday mornings. The pastors had called to check in occasionally and the Usher Captain wouldn’t leave him alone. But he stayed away for months to stew in that swirl of grief, embarrassment, anger, and fear.

However, something led him to drive over to the church that Saturday afternoon to just sit and imagine what it would feel like to walk back in. Through his car window in the parking lot, his pastor Bob asked him, “What do you imagine?” With his eyes welling up, he said, “I see what I most need.... I imagine people offering what I most need.” That’s all he had to say, and Bob knew what he meant – a community of gracious welcome; friends who know what grief is like; a place where we are not defined by what we do for a living; a call to meaning and

service beyond our own little world of pain; a place of sharing God's unconditional love. The church is, at its best, the people of Christ we most need.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, described the church this way: "A well-functioning Christian community is one in which everybody is working to release the gifts of others... and this is not for the sake of some abstract self-fulfillment: the Christian community is not a place where everyone is crying out, "Get out of my way so that I can exercise my gift! Rather, in the context of the Body of Christ, the gift of each is inseparable from the need of each. Williams concludes: "Our gifts are given for the common life... God's gifts make givers of us all."²

In this Anniversary Season of celebrating Bryn Mawr Presbyterian's 150 years, and in this moment of dramatic change for Christianity in America, together, we are being called to think deeply about what it means to practice our faith; about what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. May Paul's prayer be our prayer as we embark on this journey together:

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... you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me.

AMEN.

² Rowan Williams, What is the Church? In God's Company, The Christian Century, 6/12/07.