

What Faith Asks of Us *Don't Delay Joy*

1 Thessalonians 5:11-18

October 15, 2023

Sometimes, our best laid plans are wilted by the realities of a broken world. Sometimes, words that seemed suitable turn to ash before they are ever spoken. Owing at least partially to my passionate proclivity for advance preparation, my practice is to plan service themes each summer for the full program year, September to May. And so, way back in July, putting together a series of sermons on the demands that faith makes of us, October the 15th was deemed the day to extol the virtue of **joy**.

And now, that day has come, and that very virtue feels improper, unseemly, even tasteless. For a full week now, we have absorbed the agonizing images, videos, firsthand accounts, and news reports of terror, of senseless violence, and the commencement of war in Israel. The toll of the suffering is only beginning to come into focus. There will surely be more to come. The coordinated cruelty of the terrorist attack will reverberate in ways that bring incalculable pain to Palestinians and Israelis alike. The world watches in heartbreak, horror, and helplessness.

And so, clearly, I missed the mark on those sunny summer days of planning.
Who commends joy when misery is raw and grief is overwhelming?
Who preaches *that* sermon today?

Maybe the Apostle Paul does. Paul, an evangelist and itinerant church planter, did not have the luxury of planning sermon series, much less an entire year's worth. Paul wrote urgent letters, appeals addressed to communities of faith facing the full range of human emotion and experience. Scholars agree that First Thessalonians is the first of Paul's

many letters. In the opening chapters, the apostle describes some of what he has already endured in his mission of sharing the Gospel in the Roman world, writing how he has "suffered and been shamefully mistreated in his travels and for his preaching." Then, Paul turns to the circumstances of his readers. They are in the grip of grief. We don't know all the details, but some shared communal experience of pain and loss has overwhelmed the nascent faith of the Thessalonian Christians.

Given all of this—Paul's suffering and the community's grief—we may be surprised that Paul gives the instructions we just heard. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in *all* circumstances." In *all* circumstances? Does Paul really know what he is asking of us?

We may want to explain his folly. After all, Paul is still an amateur apostle. He's new at all this. Perhaps over time he will grow out of such unreasonable demands. Not so. If you keep turning in your Bible, you will come to the Letter to the Philippians, likely Paul's final correspondence. He writes the letter from prison in Rome where he is awaiting a sentence that is likely to demand his own life. In *those* circumstances, the seasoned, experienced apostle writes, "Rejoice always; again, I will say rejoice."

What is it that leads Paul to commend joy no matter what else may come? Here's what I think. It is *not* naivete. It is wisdom. It is *not* starry-eyed, pie-in-the-sky, flippant positivity. The joy which Paul commands is fed by a deep well of trust in the goodness of God. Like his ancestor David, Paul has found the presence of God in the least

likely of places. And so, despite everything, Paul rejoices as David danced.

Admittedly, it is a radically irrational choice. Sometimes, joy is the unexpected guest at what feels like the wrong moment. Sometimes, joy feels inappropriate, out of place. Sometimes, joy interrupts our grim solemnity. And sometimes, joy is the only sustaining response to a world beset by tragedy and lives upended by grief.

This week, our family traveled to Colorado for fall break. The beauty of those Rocky Mountains and the gift of unhurried time together felt incongruous with the news I read whenever I picked up my phone. All week long, I struggled with the blatant contradiction even as I soaked up the grace of those days together. On Friday evening, we visited the Estes Park Memorial Observatory for an extraordinary experience of stargazing. With twelve other visitors from all around the country, we sat on metal folding chairs as Mike Connolly introduced himself and the stars and planets we would be viewing. But before we climbed the stairs, Mike told a story.

On July 2, 2005, two of his three children were tragically killed in an accident. As they waded through the fog of grief, Mike and his wife Carole made the choice to do something to honor the memory of their children and perhaps give them a purpose. Mike is an aerospace engineer, and as he grieved the loss of his children, he also remembered how many nights he stayed up too late with his children viewing stars and planets through the telescope. And so, they formed a foundation, built the observatory, and immediately gave it away to the community. Now, Mike spends his days teaching students in the elementary, middle, and high schools in town to identify stars and marvel at the night sky. And a couple nights a week, he invites visitors—no charge—to come and do the same. He explained to us how this simple act of giving back brought him a sense of peace and, in time, even joy. That joy was obvious as we sat huddled under blankets with a group of strangers witnessing the

wonder of the heavens and the beauty of one man's grief transformed.

We can choose joy even in the most daunting of circumstances. But we cannot do it alone.

Lost in the English translation of Paul's original Greek is the important detail that every imperative in this morning's passage is plural. In fact, this section of the letter begins with instructions that enable us to embrace joy preemptively. "Encourage one another," the apostle writes. "Build up each other." Friends, joy is never a solo endeavor. You simply cannot produce joy all by yourself.

The practice began early this summer. Our son Ben was feeling left out as a group of older boys rode bikes without training wheels around the neighborhood, and Ben asked if we could talk. At the edge of our yard, there is an old wicker bench, and there we sat down. For months now, Ben and I have made our way to that bench. We call it our talking bench. That first day, together we created an imaginary neighborhood. It looks a lot like our neighborhood, but there are dramatic improvements. For starters, we imagined that there was a series of tunnels from one house to the next so that children could go from basement to basement to play with their friends without disturbing their parents. We thought about zip-lines and slides. We added a full-sized swimming pool in the cul-de-sac and a basketball court on the lawn. Every kid gets a go-kart to ride.

And then, Ben had a timely idea. "Hey, Dad. What if every person in our neighborhood had a button they could push whenever they wanted someone to play with them? I would call it a lonely alarm. If you're feeling lonely, you just push the alarm, and someone will come and be with you. That way, no one will be sad or left out."

Don't you think there would be high demand for one of Ben's lonely alarms? Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians, "If you want to experience joy in a time

of grief, you have to build each other up; you must encourage one another. Joy shared is joy multiplied.”

And so, I think of Paul, urging members of the early church—whose hearts were hurting—to rejoice anyway, to trust a deeper power at work in this world of pain. I think of an aerospace engineer in Colorado, who still feels every single day the sting of loss and the absence of his precious children, who gathers communities of amateur stargazers and creates space for wonder. And yes, I think of this moment in our world, which demands so much of us, can leave us feeling weary and frayed. This moment when we might find deeper reservoirs of compassion for each other, a greater capacity to savor the joy we are given. This moment when we might choose to offer one small gesture of kindness, one simple act of care for another.

Friends, there is a choice. We can keep pushing joy out into an unknown future, or we can seek the goodness of God in this moment we've been given.

There is a choice. We can try to go it alone, all by ourselves, or we can welcome the gift of community that creates the capacity for deeper fulfillment. There is a choice.

Here's what we know intuitively or learn as we travel the road of life. If we delay joy, if we put it off until everything is perfect, if we insist on the right circumstances or the right crowd, the joy we seek will simply never come. And in time, we will look back on a life of missed opportunities and declined invitations, a life spent wishing we had one more chance.

Joy comes despite everything else.

Faith asks us to welcome this gift of grace. Amen.