



February 2015 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

*I thank my God every time I remember you... (Philippians 1:3).*

This year I am inviting you to reflect on portions of Paul’s letter, *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1b)*, as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Relying heavily on the writings of Fred Craddock and of David Lose, each article will include a brief reflection on a Scripture passage, questions for reflection and discussion, and a prayer. I encourage you, as we begin, to read Paul’s letter in its entirety in one sitting; remembering as you read that this is a letter – of Paul – to a church.

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*Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance (Philippians 1:18b-19).*

As we will see again and again, one of the significant questions Paul’s letter prompts is just how in the world he finds it possible to rejoice in his circumstances. He is, after all, in prison, stripped of both his friends and usual support. And while in this verse he talks with confidence of being delivered, the verses which follow seem more ambivalent about the ultimate outcome of his imprisonment. Paul, that is, may very well die in his prison cell or, even if he evades this fate for the time being, be sentenced to death at a later time.

How, then, can he talk about rejoicing? How, then, might we emulate Paul’s confident joy?

Perhaps by reading Paul’s words carefully, we can “lean into” the joy Paul both exhibits and exudes. Two clues toward that end lay right here, tucked into this brief verse and a half.

First, Paul says that he knows that “through your prayers” he will find deliverance. Paul, in other words, knows that he is not alone. And one of the most important ingredients to a joyful life is cultivating a sense of connection with others. Paul both knows, and is known by, the Philippians. He has lived with them, worked with them, suffered with them, shared himself with them and received their sharing of themselves with him as well. These are the necessary elements of connectedness – mutual sharing that involves allowing ourselves to be truly seen so that we might see others as the children of God that they are.

A second clue to Paul's confident joy comes in the second half of the same sentence. Not only does he count on the prayers of his friends, but he also depends on "the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Paul, that is, knows that he cannot endure his situation alone and counts on the support of the Spirit.

This may not seem like much of a confession coming from Paul. He is, after all, often called "the divine Apostle" and even "the second founder of Christianity," so perhaps we expect this kind of pious talk from him. But I think this statement, like the last one, shows a profound vulnerability. Paul is willing, after all, not only to recognize his own limitations but also to admit them, even embrace them, inviting the support of both the Spirit and his friends.

To imagine that we can get by without the support of friends and God may seem foolish, but at the same time admitting our need, even our dependence, on this support can often be hard. We live in a culture that celebrates the "self-made" man or woman, and so even while we know that none of us is truly self-made, admitting our vulnerability and need can be intensely difficult. Yet only by doing so can we find the connection that helps us, as it did Paul, to rejoice even in the most challenging of circumstances.

*Read and Reflect:* Philippians 1:18b-26

*Discuss and Reflect:*

What in this reading leads you to say, "I wonder about..." or, "I noticed..."

Comment on the following: *...one of the most important ingredients to a joyful life is cultivating a sense of connection with others.* How is this connectedness lived out in your context? Share personal examples as appropriate. How might this mutual sharing be expanded?

Comment on the following: *Paul...knows that he cannot endure his situation alone and counts on the support of the Spirit.* How is this vulnerability expressed in your context? How might it be deepened?

*Pray together:* Dear God, remind us that we are your beloved children so that we may find the courage to let ourselves be seen, to see others as your children, and to trust in the help of the Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Philippians 4:23).*

*The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).*

In Christ Jesus –  
Shalom,  
+Larry

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