



May 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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Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. Philippians 3:1a

Earlier I referred to Paul’s correspondence with the Philippians as a love letter, not in the romantic sense but rather as an example of the Christian love displayed between a community and its leader. Others have called this “Paul’s letter of friendship” to capture much the same thing. But we might also call it the “letter of joy,” as rejoicing is one of its key themes. Indeed, Paul talks about rejoicing several times in his letter, each time expanding for the Philippians and for us just what he means. Several things to note:

First, rejoicing isn’t dependent on circumstances – one can rejoice whether things are going well or not. Hence, in 1:18, Paul rejoices that Christ is being proclaimed even though the motives of some of those proclaiming him may be rather sketchy.

Second, while rejoicing is something one can do alone, it seems more naturally a group activity. It appears that there is something about rejoicing that inherently responds to and derives from Christian fellowship and community. So Paul in this verse and others (2:18, 4:4) invites the Philippians to do this together and with him.

Third, rejoicing is not only something we can do *with* each other, but also *for* each other. That is, rejoicing not only reflects our life in community but encourages and supports it. So when we rejoice we may celebrate the accomplishments and blessings of another or we may console and encourage another and in this way share our joy with them. In either case, rejoicing becomes a way to connect with others in our community.

Fourth, rejoicing seems closely linked to gratitude. Rejoicing, that is, is recognizing the goodness – of God, circumstances, or each other – and allowing that recognition to permeate our whole lives.

Fifth, for this reason rejoicing is something that can be practiced. While we may think gratitude and joy are spontaneous attitudes, we can actually make the attempt to “count our blessings” and “choose joy” and in this way not only grow in our capacity to give thanks and experience joy but also live into the transformative power of gratitude. No wonder Paul will write not just “rejoice” but “I will say it again: rejoice!” Like anything worthwhile, rejoicing takes practice.

Sixth and finally, for Paul there is a particular emphasis on rejoicing “in the Lord.” If there is one thing that distinguishes joy from happiness it may be that Christian joy is rooted in the hope and confidence that stems from God’s outpouring of love we see in Christ’s cross and resurrection.

So there it is. Not much left to say except, perhaps, “Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!”

Read and Reflect: Philippians 2:19-3:1a

Discuss and Reflect:

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

Comment on the following: *...rejoicing isn’t dependent on circumstances – one can rejoice whether things are going well or not.*

When have you or your faith community rejoiced in spite of limitations – struggles?

Comment on the following: *...while rejoicing is something one can do alone, it seems more naturally a group activity. It appears that there is something about rejoicing that inherently responds to and derives from Christian fellowship and community.*

Share examples from your experience of the truth of this statement.

Pray together: *Gracious God, let our lives be filled with the gratitude and joy that comes from rejoicing in all that we have in and through you. 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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