

The Sovereign Is Near

Zechariah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7

“Joy does not just happen to us. We need to choose joy, and keeping choosing it every day.” Henri Nouwen

It may seem odd to speak of joy on a Sunday that’s still very close to the shootings. I think the Church created a Joy Sunday because Advent started out as a time of penitence in the Spirit of John the Baptist. Gaudate Sunday was meant to give us a break. This year we experience that joy in the face of unspeakable tragedy. The memorial services have started while the divers explore the man made Secombe Lake in San Bernardino for more clues. How can there be joy amid such sorrow?

It’s important to remember, again, that Paul was writing his friendship letter while imprisoned. He was also writing the portion you just heard after an appeal to harmony. Two women in the Philippian church—Eudodia and Syntyche by name—were not getting along. It was threatening the future of the church. So for Paul to move from harmony to joy is unexpected, and instructive. Paul sees joy as an anecdote to division.

Joy is usually related to happiness. Joy is feeling good. Joy is feeling up. We’ve heard joy is deeper than happiness but both are about feeling hopeful and optimistic. But there *is* a difference. We pursue happiness. We choose joy. We create happiness. We are surprised by joy. C.S. Lewis defines joy as the German *sehnsucht*, which Google translates defines as “longing.” We long to be free and to experience release. Joy is a gift that must be chosen, a gift thought up by God.

Paul says “the Lord is near.” That comes right after the double imperative to rejoice. My translation is “the Sovereign is near.” Here in the church we throw around the title Lord too much. A Lord in Paul’s day was not just another name for God or Jesus. The Lord was what we would call the mayor, the police chief, the CEO of ESRI, the President of U of R and Landon Donovan rolled into one. He, and it usually was a he, was “the Man.” He was the one who could make things happen.

The *sovereignty—the quality of a Sovereign*, of God is a hallmark of the Christian faith that John Calvin discovered. Remember, John Calvin, like Paul was a refugee, a traveler, a child and youth of France but an adult of Germany and Switzerland. Calvin grabbed upon this idea of God's sovereignty to say even though we don't see it now we must claim that "God is the ruler yet", in all the pains and delights of life including, for Calvin losing his only child or children (we're not sure) in infancy.

Sovereignty is a political concept; sovereignty means who ultimately decides. So when Paul says "the Lord, the Sovereign is near" he is expressing confidence that the disharmony between these two women, the imprisonment he's experiencing and what he calls elsewhere this "momentary light affliction" is not all there is. He chooses joy for himself and directs others to make the same choice.

There is no doubt that Eastern thought is gaining traction here in the West. Some of us have been struggling with the idea that if we're "to be here now", as most forms of meditation suggest, that is, to enjoy life as we know it without complaint or attempting to control other people; how can we be both (1) hopeful about the future (especially in light of the shootings), *and* (2) long for something more. Isn't longing future-oriented, even a way of escaping the goodness of the present moment?

I can only say that longing is good, it's a discovery as much as it is an endeavor. Longing means we are not content with the status quo. Longing means that we give of ourselves for a world that is not yet here. This longing produces two things:

This longing produces what Dorothee Solle has called "a revolutionary patience." We will have to be patient in our war with ISIS. Yours and my weapons will not be guns and military might, even if we pay taxes to make some of that happen. Our weapons will be conversations, ideas, and a desire to grow so that the things we don't understand now will become plain. Revolutionary patience is not a plan for doing nothing. It just knows that the truly important things cannot be forced; they must mature as we put ourselves in the path of people we currently don't understand.

This past week my wife introduced me to a young Muslim after the Prayer Vigil at the San Bernardino Roman Catholic Cathedral. After we went home my wife asked “do you think we should invite him and his wife over to have our actual first Muslim guests into our home? I said, “Sure, why not?” An aside, we’ve been thinking about getting a terrier as we see a few we like. Then Sandy came back to me a few days later: “according to the internet dogs are not allowed in the house when Muslims are eating.” Who knew? Revolutionary patience takes the time to understand the other.

In another example of what revolutionary patience will take we prayed a unity prayer at the end of the Vigil this last week. The prayer was prayed by Jews, Christians, Muslims and Christians of black, Hispanic and Anglo roots. It went like this:

“The Light of God surrounds me. The love of God enfolds me. The power of God protects me. The presence of God watches over me. The mind of God guides me. The life of God flows through me. The laws of God direct me. The power of God abides with me. The joy of God uplifts me. The strength of God renews me. The beauty of God inspires me. Wherever I am, God is.”

Some of that prayer is not language we use around here very often.

Revolutionary patience will require us to learn more things about God. Is God love or spite? Does God’s law conflict with God’s grace? Can God within the human spirit change the way we live and the mercy we extend, or is it just wishful thinking? Revolutionary patience, and the joy that it breeds, must be open to who God is to other Christians of various traditions, Jews, Muslims and others. Living in American today requires it.

Along with revolutionary patience *the longing we seek and the joy we choose also produces a deepening appreciation of both the God whom we seek and the people we love.* Paul is convinced that Jesus, as Charles Wesley wrote, is all compassion. He’s convinced that Jesus is worth knowing—“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection” he wrote earlier in the letter—and that the people around him, from Euodia and Syntyche to Timothy his co-writer are valuable in that church.

Here at First Presbyterian, how easy it is to think that we would be better off if so and so was not around. It's easy to think we need so and so, like young families or more givers, to be the kind of church God wants. Joy is content with what it has, even while longing for something more. What is longed for is not success or numbers. What is longed for is an experience of the holy and the other, a deepening awareness that we are held in God's embrace.

As strange as it might seem, the best way to joy is not to look for it directly, but to look at and for something else. In the Christian tradition this something is always *Someone*. We call that Someone the Christ, the resurrected Anointed One. There is an old song written by a woman amid illness and encouraged by her husband to publish it 13 years after her illness.

Once earthly joy I craved, sought peace and rest;
Now Thee alone I seek, give what is best.
This all my prayer shall be: More love, O Christ to Thee;
More love to Thee, more love to Thee!

Martin Luther King Jr. told his closest followers, "The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may." The most revolutionary words you and I pray once a Sunday are "thy will be done," because we don't know where those words are going to get us. It will certainly take us to places we cannot imagine, like dinner with a Muslim couple.

The way to joy is to get in touch with your longings whatever they may be, the longings for a safer world, the longing for more significant relationships and friendships, the longings for the health of your children, grandchildren and friends, and the longings for your church. We may not get what we want—we have no control over what others decide. But we can keep seeking God's will, and in that desire will be our joy.

Finally, joy begins with little acts of kindness. I told someone this week I believe people are being more considerate at the grocery store and around town after the shootings. Maybe I'm just making that up. But I think there's a sense of how

fragile life is and all we do not see. I'd encourage you to be kind, gentle in the little things. Joy might be the gift.

The story is told of a professor who was driving down the street one day with an old pastor friend and peace advocate in the car." The professor says "I am sure we were talking about great things. Suddenly the pastor and peace advocate said, "Slow down, there's a school zone." He went on to say, "I still work on big issues and always will, but I'm paying more attention these days to little things, like casual meetings and driving in traffic, because I've come to realize that the peace I get there is the only peace I'm going to get in this world."

Joy is about longing for a world we may not see. These shootings have been a blow. But after the shock wears off we become candidates for joy; because joy leads us to the only world worth talking about. It's the world where the Sovereign is not just near, but among us. Christmas is coming. Let's long for the Sovereign to be near now and choose joy over fear or hate. Amen.