

“SERVING THE LORD WITH JOY”

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-11

June 26, 2005

Rev. John W. Fowler

This morning I would like to speak to you about the joy of the Lord, serving the Lord with joy. Oftentimes we hear in church we are supposed to serve Him, but I especially want you to hear that God wants you to serve Him with joy. And one thing that has just occurred to me today that — Marietta and I, and I speak for her — we are so glad that we got reappointed to First United Methodist in Lenoir. You know, no one has ever put up with me a seventh year. That doesn't mean that you have put up with me a whole year yet. I've stayed six years before, so I am glad that we are not packing up and leaving; it's good to be here. But there is a joy, though, that really is not dependent on circumstances. It's more than being happy. The joy of the Lord is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks about the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He speaks of love, joy, peace, patience and kindness, but it really comes from a relationship with Christ that goes deeper than any circumstance, and Paul, when he was in prison, in these 104 verses, some 14 times he mentions *joy* or *rejoicing*, and you would think — it's the worse of circumstances: you are in prison, you can't travel anymore — but still, there is this joy that he has. It's the joy of the Lord. Let me read to you from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. He writes:

¹*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

²*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

³*I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

⁷*It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.*

⁸*God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

⁹*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*

Back in 1982 my father-in-law, Ray Wilson, received some disturbing news by way of television: He didn't have a job. For some 40 years he had worked for the Woolworth Company and then Woolco, and been a hard-working store manager, moved more times than any Methodist preacher had, but now he is in in Wilmington and still working those long hours at age sixty, but there was an announcement on television that Woolco store company was closing. It seemed like a terrible time, a terrible disappointment, but then he made a discovery. He had always been good with his hands, in fact, I used to save up things that needed to be done around the house. I'd plan them with trips when he would come. I'd always tell him to bring his tool box because

he was so good, being a fix-it man. And he is very good at working with things and so he ended up having a job hanging curtains for Dorothy's Ruffled Originals. These were real nice curtains and he is very good at that kind of thing, very meticulous, perfectionistic. I mean he is so good at it, in fact, they fly him down to the Caribbean and all across the United States and then when they could take them down to wash them and they couldn't get them back up, they would call him up. He seemed to really enjoy that job and of course, he took Liz's mom along with him on some of those trips as well. Another thing he did that I guess he hadn't had time as much for, he loves to cook and they started catering the Wednesday night meals at the Church that they go to and some of the Men's Breakfasts, and they finally have retired from those two jobs, but you know, you saw that, even though what seemed to be the worst thing, that they discovered God's joy in serving Him.

I want to ask you briefly this morning, what have you allowed to rob you of God's joy in your life? What circumstances are in your life that, if you could just change, I'd be happy? But it doesn't change.

Two discoveries as I studied this passage this week I wanted to share with you, I believe will help us discover the true deep joy of the Lord as we serve Him. First of all, I found, as I looked into the background of Paul's letter, as you look at the beginning of the Church at Philippi. You find the story in Acts, chapter 16. Paul is a missionary. He's a type A, go-get-'em missionary. He's used to traveling and he wants to go into Asia and into Bithynia but the Spirit of the Lord stops him. Let me explain then why He just stops him. Have you ever had that there's a dream you had, and now's the time you want to go forward, but the door is shut. But then he has a prayer and this vision that this man from Macedonia says, "Come help us."

Sometimes God want us to go in a direction that we hadn't thought about, but God has thought about because He there are some people that He wants to use you to help and so, they go to Philippi and he doesn't go into the synagogue and preach and teach as was his custom; he feels led to go down to the river and there is this ladies prayer meeting. And a woman named Lydia there who is a seller of purple, that is, that she sells fine women's clothing, that's really what it is, but Lydia is converted and invites him to come to her home and the Church in Philippi. Well, Paul and Silas keep preaching, the Church is building, and there is a slave girl who has the spirit of divination who Paul finds extremely annoying, to the point that he prays for her deliverance. She gets delivered. The only problem is that her owners don't like the fact that they are losing money because she can't tell the future anymore. And so, you know it's one thing to be a Christian, but to hit somebody in the pocket book, it can upset some people. And it does and so they bring Paul and Silas before the authorities.

"These people are causing trouble; they are upsetting our community."

They bring them forth to the authorities; they beat them; they put them into prison. Some thanks for serving God. Now if it had been me, well, I'd be a little upset with the Lord, wouldn't you? But it says about midnight they start singing hymns to God and everyone else was listening to them. I'll *bet* they were listening to them. And then there was this earthquake and rumbling and well, all the jail cells open up and the Roman jailer is about ready to kill himself because that's the price; it doesn't matter why they got loose — they got loose on your watch, you're dead.

And Paul says, “Don’t do that! We’re all here.” They hadn’t run.

And the jailer says, “What must I do to be saved?”

And Paul says, “Believe on the Lord, Jesus and you and your whole household will be saved.”

So there is great joy. There is a jailbreak; there are some conversions, and there is great joy amidst what seemed to be the worst of circumstances. And also, with the disappointment — Paul didn’t want to go there in the first place — and look what God is doing. He has made a choice to go with God. That’s the first discovery I saw as I went through this passage — that the joy of the Lord is a choice. There comes a time when either we are going to accept what’s happened, the reality, and we can keep asking God to change it, or we say, “God, I’m just choosing Your joy in the midst of this difficult time.”

It was back in about 1980 that I thought that I was really sacrificing the best I knew how. I gave up my car to go to Seminary. I took a vow of poverty that I didn’t want to take, but that’s just the way it was, and I was a boarder in a household. Well, it was a good day. I went out to supper with a friend of mine, came back home and I noticed that my bed was out in the front yard; it was all smoking. If you come home and your bed is smoking on the front yard and it seems that it all wet because the firemen have been there — that’s not good. It’s not a good day. I just was dumbfounded and told my landlady how sorry I was and she was sorry too. I was glad that it was contained in my bedroom and it was a sleeping blanket that I had left on and it had caught fire and I don’t use those anymore, as you can tell why. But, as you can imagine, she strongly suggested I go live somewhere else, so that night, as I was sleeping on my friend’s couch, I thought, this just doesn’t make any sense: I go to all this sacrifice, finally decide to go to Seminary, and then this happens.

And so, I think for a couple of weeks I was kind of going through some self pity. But at that time, all the beginning students, they put them in a hospital setting or some kind of clinical setting and they put me at the Georgia Mental Health Institute, which I got to where I liked playing checkers with them. I remember playing a ball game out there one day. You know, I forgot, I was just getting real competitive, hoping we would win. I thought, you know, I really shouldn’t be that way out here; I ought to remember why I am here. But I still remember thinking, so what? I’ve got some clothes that burned up; I’ve got some books that are singed, but that’s nothing compared to losing your mental health. And at that time God gave me the gift of perspective as I choose His joy.

Chuck Swindoll, in his book, *Laugh Again*, on the Book of Philippians, shares about an 82-year old minister who had skin cancer and had as many as 15 operations, I think, and was not only in a lot of pain but was pretty self conscious; it was scarring his face some. He had gotten where he just stayed inside. He didn’t want to go out and be around people. And he, too, was having a hard time and he came across a book by Tim Hansel, called, *You’ve Got to Keep on Dancing*. It’s a story of how, after a climbing accident, he dealt with chronic pain and he finally came to the point where he realized, you know, this pain is not going away; I’ve got to make a decision. And he chose the joy of the Lord. Well, this preacher read that and he shared about what a change it made in his life. The pain hadn’t gone away but life was so much better now. And he

read that book and he said, “You know, that man’s crazy. How can he have all this pain and choose the joy of the Lord?”

But he put it off, but he finally said, “Well, Lord, you know I preached about the joy but I’m just not experiencing it.”

And so, he got down on his knees; he prayed, “Lord, I know it’s not John 15: *These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, that your joy would be full,*” and he prayed and the joy came on him. And he was happy and so lighthearted he felt like dancing the first time in a long time.

“Well, it’s time to get out; I’ve been inside too long.” He went out to a fast food restaurant and the lady noticed that he seemed particularly happy and said, “Well, why are you so happy? Is it your birthday?”

“Oh, no ma’am, it’s better than that.”

“Well, is it your anniversary?”

“Oh, no ma’am, it’s better than that.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Honey, I’ve got the joy of the Lord. How about you?”

“No, I have to work on Sunday.”

For some people, the joy of the Lord is a deep, abiding sense of God’s presence. One discovery that I have made is: It’s a choice that you make.

Another discovery I made is when I looked at this first chapter of Philippians, and the Apostle Paul, when he is writing it some ten years later, he is in prison. He remembers these Philippians fondly. He remembers the miraculous way, how he didn’t want to go there, and there is this prayer meeting and then the jail break — just good memories — and he remembers the people. And he begins to thank God for them in his prayers, and especially in verse 6 was the second discovery that I made. He said:

⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

That is, that not only do we find the joy of the Lord by choosing it, but also as we choose it we allow God to work His spiritual growth in us. That is, that we get to the point where we can ask Him *why*, and He may give us some insight for what we do, where we may finally get to the point where, Lord I may not understand why this is happening, I don’t understand why these circumstances are not changing, but I am choosing for you to teach me through this. I am willing to learn what You want me to learn. I know it’s a painful lesson but right now I am willing to

learn. I am willing You to take this experience and use it for my growth.

In verse 6 it says:

⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

What robs you of your joy? What are you allowing to rob you of the joy of the Lord? Three things I find that rob me of my joy. See if they work for you. One is *worry*. When worry grips us the joy seems to evaporate. *Stress*, when worry gets really out of hand and multiplies is another one. And *fear* is the third one.

What I want to suggest to you today is that the joy of the Lord can come to you as you choose this joy and as you allow Him to teach you through whatever you are going through, or will go through. There are three passages from Philippians that I want to share with you, first of all that help us to deal with worry. What do you worry about the most? What do you worry about right now? One of the best prayers you are going to find in Philippians, chapter 4, where Paul, in prison, could die at any moment, says,

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I will say: Rejoice! ⁵Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. ⁶Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer, with supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the promises and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is right up at the top of my worry list, to pray. And what a great prayer it is. And if you say, “Well, I’ve tried that and I keep worrying,” well, just keep praying it and God’s courage and joy and peace will come into your life.

The second one we experience is stress — that there are things that happen to us that are extremely stressful. Now the Apostle Paul was certainly experiencing an unusual amount of stress and he lists them in II Corinthians 11. He says it this way:

²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

You’ve seen those stress tests that have points for life experiences, death and divorce or loss of health. Paul is just off the charts, but still what did he claim? In Philippians 4:13 he says:

¹³I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I have it on my desk because sometimes I need to be reminded that, well, I don't have enough brains or I don't have enough stamina, but when I come back to the things that I am stressing about, usually I find that I am doing it in my own strength. But when I realize *He* will give me the strength, what a difference it will make.

The third joy-stealer is fear. What are those things that you are afraid of? Jesus told a story of the parable of the talents. One was given five talents, one three; one was given one. The one that had five talents used his talents. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the master." The one that had three talents, he used his talents. Jesus said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the master." The one that had one talent was afraid of his master; he didn't use his talent and he was judged because of that.

What fear is keeping you from serving the Lord? I remember the first time I went swimming and I was afraid of the water — there is no question about it. My brother was with me. He was no help; he couldn't swim either. And then my mother, bless her heart — good lady, she was us there but I really wasn't counting on her jumping in to rescue me, so when I jumped in it was just praying to God that I sure hoped that what that man said, I would come back up, and sure enough, I did.

I got to go swimming this past week, and you know, I love it now, but sometimes what God will do is He will just push us. You are so afraid of this but His perfect love will cast out fear. In Philippians 3:14 we read that it is oftentimes what we are afraid of is something in the future, something that is going to happen. Helen Mellincost wrote this:

"I was regretting the past and fearing the future. Suddenly God was speaking: "My name is I am." I waited and God continued: "When you live in the past, with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I was. When you live in the future, with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I will be. When you live in this moment, it is not hard. I am here. My name is I am."

The promise for fear especially is the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:14.

I press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let me close with this story. You know, I think of watching Billy Graham preach, and I'm sure if he had his way he would have that healthy body back, but there is just a powerful spirit that is there. He hadn't spoken in so long, but people are just flocking to New York to hear him for this last American crusade. God has been faithful to him and used him in a mighty way.

But Jim Cantorre is one that he is younger. He is the Weather Channel man and a lot of times you will see him actually in a storm, with a hurricane or flooding coming. But, as he says, several years ago he went through a real life storm, that is, that he found out that his wife had Parkinson's Disease and she was only thirty-nine at the time. At that time they were just devastated, but somehow God really began to teach them how to deal with this storm and to find out about it. And now they are very involved with others and helping with research. But he says, "You know,

one of the things about my job I've found, whether it's being out in the weather storms, it's terrible to see the devastation, but it's wonderful to see how God is able to work and people pull together and to see how He gives strength in the midst of that."

The joy of the Lord is a choice and also it is a decision to allow God to work in our lives. He is still on His throne; He is still the Lord of the Universe and He will never leave us or forsake us.

Let us pray.

Lord, we confess at times we serve You but the joy somehow has left. We pray You would bring it back into hearts today. We ask this in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.