

## **Rejoice In The Lord...ALWAYS**

### **Philippians 4:4-7**

Rejoice in the Lord always; *again* I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication  
with thanksgiving let your requests  
be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

## **Rejoice In The Lord...ALWAYS**

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### **I.**

Not that it comes as any particular kind of news to you, but just let me say this whole “preaching thing” can be kind of a drag, week after week, month after month, year after year. Unless, of course, the Spirit gives you something to say. At that point it becomes quite exciting to preach as it feels as if you have some *actual* good news to share with people about whom you care so much. That said, it doesn’t change the time or effort involved in actually writing the sermon, but it becomes pain with a purpose: hard, but exciting, with a positive, tangible result.

I am not sure how other preachers do it, but I always seem to do best when I stick to preaching what I call the “mystical reality.” Yes, we sprinkle in some biblical history, a bit of theology, and maybe even some Greek or Hebrew, but it is the revelation of the mystical reality of the text that carries the day. I am feeling that today is such a day.

### **II.**

Speaking of something being a drag, I am fully aware that being a preacher’s kid is no picnic either. Inevitably, you show up in the sermon. Which, to me, is just the cost of doing this particular business. If your parents run a dairy farm you learn to milk cows, that’s just how it is. If your parent is a preacher, you occasionally end up as a sermon illustration. Not that my own kids ever really complained all that much, but when they did I would just tell them, “Tough, it is your turn.”

Today is Tucker’s turn, our middle child. When he was in 11th grade here at Canton HS he took an exam for AP European History. He got a good grade, but when he got the test back the teacher wrote a comment asking him why he gave so many examples to a particular essay question. Tucker replied, “The instructions said to give several examples. Doesn’t that mean seven?” I mean, you can understand his thinking, right? “Several” *sounds* like “seven.”

### III.

I was reminded of that story as I was considering today's scripture reading from Philippians 4. In this pericope, or passage, Paul begins with the simply terrific phrase: "Rejoice in the Lord *always*; AGAIN I will say, Rejoice." Which immediately makes me think of the song based on this verse we'd sing as a round in youth group at my home church when growing up.

Beyond the quickly ensuing but not unpleasant resulting ear worm, I had this moment of uncertainty as to the meaning of Paul's words. Or, more precisely, the *one* word he is stressing, "rejoice." "Rejoice" sounds an awful lot like "joy" and so in my mind, up until now, I have always understood rejoice as cognate with a sense of happy and energetic exuberance. Turns out this is no more the case than "several" meaning "seven." While the words may *sound* the same, they do not *mean* the same thing.

### IV.

Almost always translated as "rejoice," the Greek word used here by Paul is *xairō*, and is defined as a delight in God's grace or, literally, an experience of God's grace (favor), or to be conscious (glad) for God's grace. A snappy catchphrase definition of "rejoice," then, would be "Glad for Grace." However, this is a gladness *within oneself*. While we would usually understand "joy" to be external, overt, and demonstrable, "rejoice" is internal and subtle while in no way less ascertainable.

Now, admittedly, I might be shaving the baloney a little thin here. However, I think it is certainly a correct distinction to make, as well as one which I believe will prove very useful to us undertaking an earnest, studied, and significant spiritual journey. As is the case with any serious pursuit, sooner or later it comes down to the small things, the details, the slightest turn of the screw.

### V.

While I certainly felt like I was on to something in illuminating the contrasting definitions of "joy" and "rejoice," I really struggled to come up with an example or illustration to denote the difference and the importance of such a distinction. What, I wondered, does it look like to be "Glad for Grace?" Enter the mystical reality.

Last Sunday was both an exciting and busy day for our church, with the men singing “White Christmas,” the fabulous Christmas Showcase put on by Andrea and the Church School kids and, of course, the delicious potluck which followed. While all this was going on, though, you probably missed a couple of phone calls made to the church and answered by folks in the kitchen; one just prior the service, and the other at the start of the potluck. Each call was from the same person, a man from Canton who found himself in something of a pickle down in Georgia and was looking for help to get him a room for the night.

## **VI.**

Like all of you, I am sure, my first reaction was sheer astonishment. Someone calling *our* church from *Georgia*?!!? While certainly a bit odd it is not out of keeping with the past, as a lot of crazy stuff (good crazy) has gone on at our church over the years, and there are some remarkable stories of how people have found their way to us, often owing to astounding circumstances which led them to our door (or telephone, as the case may be).

I would remind us, though, that however random such things may *seem* to appear, they are usually not without rhyme and, quite often, for very good reason. Apparently, this person calling from Georgia has been to our church and has met me (though I can put a name to a face). While many of us are fortunate enough to have people in our lives willing to help us, imagine if you had *nobody* to do so but found yourself in dire circumstances? What would be your last, best option? Who would you call? Not the Ghostbusters. You’d call the Church on the Park, we *always* help. People in the community know this about us. This, to me, is a good thing.

## **VII.**

While helping people *is* a good thing, and what a church (any church) should be doing, it is also a hard thing; regardless of if we say yes or no to the request. To that point, and while we are on the topic, I will share with you the two rules used to decide if we, as a church, will help when we receive a request such as Sunday’s phone call. First, folks can’t be scamming. Second, folks must be endeavoring to help themselves. While not always the case, in most instances asking people to tell their story usually reveals the truth of their need.

Feeling this individual had met the threshold, our church put the guy up for the night at a motel down in GA (about \$90). Thankfully, ours is a generous and compassionate congregation, and we have the resources to do such things every now and again. The hitch-in-the-giddy-up, though, is where there is *some* need, there is usually a lot *more* need where that came from.

## **VIII.**

I was not at all surprised, therefore, when the same individual called the church on Wednesday. Still in Georgia, things had become more dire. Homeless, hungry, no money, cold and wet, I could hear the rain coming down and the fear in his voice. While no stranger to hard times, this was of a new order for him. I will admit, my first reactions were impatience and aggravation. I mean, *I* had things to *do*.

One of which was to start looking at today's scripture reading which just happened to be right in front of me on computer screen. I read Paul's words, "*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*" Now, the caller wasn't asking for anything, and there really wasn't anything else that could be done...except to listen. Which is what I did; attentively and without interruption. I did not trying to fix anything, I was just present with him in this tribulation. After 10 minutes he sounded better, I told him I'd be praying for him, and we hung up.

## **IX.**

The next day, Thursday, I did some visiting then arrived at the church to meet the folks coming to service the lifts (working fine now). Just as I was about to go do the next thing the phone rang. Same guy, still in Georgia and now, unequivocally, at the bottom of the barrel. With great humility he asked if we could buy him a bus ticket. He just wanted to get home to Canton.

Paul says: "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*" While nowhere near God, our church is as close as some people are going to get. Certainly this was the case for our friend stuck in Georgia.

I called the bus company and determined that while there was a bus *stop* near to him, he'd have to go the bus *terminal* in Macon about 90 miles away. Once there, I could purchase a ticket he would be able to obtain at the

counter. I explained the situation and told him if he got to Macon, at whatever day or hour, to call me we'd buy him a bus ticket home.

## **X.**

Which is when I went from being the chicken to being the pig. When you sit down to a breakfast of bacon and eggs, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed. So I gave him my cell phone number, something I *rarely* do in these situations. Over the course of the next 5 hours I received periodic texts updating me on his progress: looking for a ride, got a ride, on the ride, will be in Macon at 8 p.m.

When the first couple of texts came in I started to regret giving out my cell, but couldn't see any other way of pulling this off. Then, I tried to imagine what this experience must be like from *his* perspective, as he had absolutely no assurance that we'd come through with the bus fare. I texted him and said, "*Listen, I know you have every reason to be uptight, but if you get to Macon I'm going to get you the ticket. Gotta have faith.*" After he responded, "*Thank u man it's been a struggle I been out here starving,*" I replied, "*I get it. Keep going. We'll be there for you.*"

## **XI.**

Which was my way of saying to *him*, what Paul is saying to *us* in today's passage: "*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" Sure enough, around 8 p.m. he called me from the Macon bus terminal. I then called Greyhound and booked a one way ticket from Macon, GA to Canton, NY at a cost of \$270.89. He gave the identifiers to the person at the counter and they provided him the ticket for the next bus out at 10:25 that evening to begin a 36 hour journey home.

I am telling you this story for two reasons. First, so you can realize and understand how much all of *you* allow us to do as a church. You are an amazing congregation which has chosen the harder path to yield positive and tangible results in the world. This is something which should excite us all, and something of which we should all be very proud.

## **XII.**

The second reason I am telling you this story is to illustrate the correct understanding of “rejoicing.” After obtaining the bus ticket our man in Georgia called to thank me. Even with ticket in hand, after five days of very hard living and hardly any food he was *utterly* devoid of any semblance of “joy.” However, he was *profoundly* “rejoicing” in a way I have seldom been privileged to witness. There was a gladness for the grace within him which he had received from God through *you*, this congregation.

The reason the Apostle Paul calls us to “Rejoice in the Lord...ALWAYS,” is because *rejoicing* is an acknowledgment that we *are* aware of, and glad for the grace which God has placed in each one of us, without exception. Moreover, this grace is ALWAYS there even when it is sometimes hard to see or remember. Which, while not ideal, is certainly preferable to the kind of clarity experienced at the Macon bus terminal on Thursday night.

## **XIII.**

Though this would be a fitting place to say, “Amen,” and close out this sermon, I would like to end with a couple of caveats. First, let me assure all of you that, in general, I am ever mindful of the financial realities of our church (which is why I help Jim with the boiler every year). I am also quite aware of the cost involved in being the church in this recent “Georgia peach” situation (\$360.89). Which, while not a crazy amount, it is certainly significant and not something we can or will do in all instances, nor should we.

However, every now and then we get tuned into the mystical reality of the world as revealed by scripture. When *that* happens, and I believe the tale I wove for you this morning is one of those instances, we must accept that however “tough,” it is our turn and we need to get on with it. That said, we should have absolutely *no* expectation that “our turn” will necessarily result in the desired, or even satisfactory, outcome. We simply need to do the right thing when it is the right thing to do, and leave the rest to God.

## **XIV.**

Second, doing the right thing is *always* its own reward. More to the point, however, when we rejoice, when we are glad for grace within ourselves and act

in ways so as to allow others to rejoice along with us, we should not be surprised when others cause us to rejoice even more so.

On Wednesday I had the opportunity to meet for the first time our new Director of Music and Pianist, Meg Dissinger. She also met our Office Coordinator Christy, and Linda, most likely our new Congregational Coordinator. I also gave Meg a tour of the church along with a set of keys (to the Kingdom) and she was able to check out the choir room, music library, sanctuary, and to tinkle the ivories on the grand piano. Not only will Meg *amaze* you when she begins on January 12th, we should all *be* amazed she found her way to us. After running the classified for 5 weeks we had exactly *one* person express interest. It just so happens that this one person is the new Professor of Choral Music at Crane.

## **XV.**

Now, do I think that there is a *causal* relationship between Meg coming here to work at our church and doing things like dropping \$360.89 to get our friend home from Georgia? No. Yet, I *do* believe they *are* related, somehow, in ways we will never understand but are real and at work nonetheless. When we as a church live, act, and speak as people who have a gladness for grace within us, when we are a congregation which rejoices regardless of the joy we have or have not, we come to share in the mystical reality which not only carries the day, it carries us through our lives together each day as a church, as families, and as individuals on the spiritual journey. As we sow, so shall we reap. Let us be glad for the grace within us...ALWAYS; again I will say, Rejoice! Amen.