



“COMPLETE JOY”
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Philippians 2:1-13

It’s an interesting passage of scripture, the Philippians letter that Paul wrote. It has several things to it that are very important but unfortunately don’t find themselves in the scriptures. You know me - I like to set a context before I preach. I like to get us in the right frame of mind, understand what it is that Paul’s trying to say. Paul is writing to a church in Philippi, which is in a different area than he is used to preaching. Paul, for the longest time, had been spending all of his time down in the Fertile Crescent in what we now know as Turkey and those places. He was preaching to communities of dispersed Jews who had an inclination to want to hear a gospel about a Messiah named Jesus. A man born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth who came and began to teach and to heal and do all sorts of wonderful things and then strangely died. Died for the sins of all humanity. There were folks in Galatia who wanted to hear that. There were folks in Ephesus who wanted to hear that. There were folks all over the Fertile Crescent who wanted to hear that.

But Paul got an inkling to preach that word in a different place. He was asked to travel across the sea to get to Philippi and preach that word there. And what’s so amazing about that, and I wish I had an atlas here or a map that I could show you, is that Paul had been preaching for so long on this one small corner of Asia, Southwest Asia. It’s in the Fertile Crescent, it’s on this big continent, it’s around Jerusalem, it’s in Judah, it’s all up in that area around Turkey, but Paul was asked to go to Europe to what we now know as Greece and to preach there, just a foothold across the sea into another continent. So Paul went to Philippi and he talked to some folks there and got them organized, so to speak. He got them arranged together and meeting on a regular basis and talking about the gospel. He preached to them this Gospel of the risen Christ. He preached to them this Gospel of a God who loved so much that God would give God’s only Son and they heard it with joy.

But you know Philippi is a lot like a lot of towns, cities, especially seaports. There’s an old sailor sitting over here and he knows all about seaports and you know they have stories. And some communities like that are not the greatest places of good repute, let’s put it that way. They have questionable histories and backgrounds. They have questionable characters that influence things. Well, Philippi was no different. It was chockfull of people who all had their own opinion about what life was supposed to be like. Most of these folks had a lot of Greek influence in their learning, so they were very astute in Greek, what we would call mythology, in their terms Greek religion. All of the different gods and all of the different ways that people can come together and worship and do other things together, let’s put it that way.

But when Paul began a church there, Paul’s insistence upon that church was that it would be faithful to this gospel and for Paul this was very important because I think he had a greater plan of where this gospel needed to go. Philippi was on the way to Rome. It was the first step, but it was on the way to Rome. And even further than that, Paul wanted to go to the ends of the earth, at that time Spain. This was an important church for Paul. This was an extremely important church because, like I said, it was the first foothold. It was the big toe inside the door of Europe and if you lose that you’ve lost Europe. It makes it that much harder to get folks to want to go there. So Paul is writing to this church. Now he has since left, he’s gone back and began ministries in other places.

At this point in time, Paul’s kind of a little bit in trouble. He is not able to go back to Philippi and so he writes and the letter that he writes is basically a letter of encouragement and teaching, teachings about what it means to be a Christian, teachings about what it means to be the Church.

Now it's an interesting thing that he writes because Philippi which is such a wonderful town to begin with. They have all sorts of ideas of what church should be like and unfortunately they are not seeing quite eye to eye. It's not that they're fighting amongst each other, they just don't agree. And they all have a concept of what it means to be the Church, but none of them really sees it the way that Paul sees it and so Paul is going to present to them a sense of unity, a sense of wholeness of connection amongst one another and so he'll be writing about all of the good things that the faith have brought them, the good things like encouragement, consolation in love, sharing in the Spirit. "If there are any of these things present in your faith, in your community, in your gathering there, let your mind be the same as Christ." He says, "...make my joy complete. Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves." And then he goes on, he says, "...let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...."

Now you've heard me say before perhaps that we have trouble when we come to translations of scripture from a foreign language or an ancient language into a modern English or a modern American English. I wish I could describe for you all of the places and I wish there would be some way to emphasize what these are. In old English we had an easier way, we understood, but in modern English we have consolidated a lot of our words into a fewer number of words. One of those is the concept of "you all" or as we are fond to say down here, "y'all" and "you" singular.

Please know that what Paul is trying to say in this letter to this church. It's not an individualistic thing. It's not a do it yourself and do it your own way. It's something even more sacred than that. It's as community come together. It's not that you might have a split personality or schizophrenia or something like that kind of "Be of one mind." That's not what he's talking about. He's talking about us as a collective church if we were Philippi and he is saying you need to be of one mind and let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. And then he goes on to describe what that mind looks like. It's not a haughty mind. It's not a mind of greatness or power or of glory. It is a mind of humility and servitude. He's trying to describe for this church in Philippi specifically what it means to be the church in Philippi or anywhere for that matter. Be of the same mind that was in Christ Jesus and don't think of yourselves as greater than others. Just because you're in the church doesn't mean that those outside the church are less than you. They are God's children, too.

Now you might be asking so what does this have to do with us today. The truth of the matter is that it has everything to do with us today as the Church in the world. Because all too often I think what I hear as a pastor is that we tend to split very easily, very readily. We'll split over anything. If we don't agree on something, why we'll just take our marbles and go somewhere else and start a church over there. And if we don't like the color of the hymnals that we are going to buy or the color of the carpet, why we'll just go elsewhere. Now those are overly simplistic and I know that, but there are divisions in the church that tend to break down community, and that is what Paul is trying to address.

My question would be, are there any divisions in St. Andrew's? Nah, I don't see any. But is there anything in our community, in our community of faith, in our congregation that is not of the same mind as in Christ Jesus? Now the tendency is to want to answer that question personally and I don't think that is what we are supposed to be doing. I think collectively. Yes, I think we do owe it to ourselves and owe it to Christ and owe it to the church and owe it to God to address those issues within ourselves and those things that are hiding within ourselves that we've got hidden well and behind the shadows that are not of the same mind as Christ. We do need to do that.

But I think Paul's address here to Philippi and Paul's address to St. Andrew's is going to be one and the same. What do we do as a congregation that may or may not be of the same mind as in Christ Jesus? What are those things that may or may not lead us to Christ as a community?

I'm about due for my physical. I haven't had it yet this year, but I keep thinking about a physical, going to a doctor and talking to a physician about my health and there are always those things that come up, you know. Usually the time that you go to the doctor is when you're sick, right? Seldom do we think about preventative medicines. The older we get, the more we start to think about it, but oftentimes we just kind of – "I'll do that later when I get a chance. I don't really have time this week. I need to go do this and go do that" so I'll put that off for a little while and I'll come back to it. But you know when you go to a physician and a physician looks at you and gives you the examinations and checks out your vital signs and begins to think about all of the things and talk to you about all of the things that are going on in your life, what they are looking for are outward and visible symptoms of something that might be going on inside you that is not quite healthy.

So with that in mind, look at our church, our community of believers and all Paul is asking us to do is to examine ourselves for the outward and visible symptoms, the signs that might be hiding something of a spiritual need or illness. I'm not suggesting there are any. I am suggesting that we often times need to do that periodically. We need to stop and reflect upon who we are as a church. Do we have spiritual shortcomings? Is there a spiritual illness that we can see the outward symptoms of, perhaps? Do we see things in us that might be leading us in the wrong direction? Are there things that might...get the idea?

Miss Ruth, I appreciate you reading the scripture on short notice because you did step up to do that but there were two other verses there that you didn't read and I want to read those because I think they really do have a bearing on who we are. That is verses 12 and 13 of chapter two. Paul finishes up that whole passage by saying: "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me not only in my presence but much more now in my absence." And then he says these very important words, hear these: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. You know on first glance, we look at that and we think, what's Paul saying? Is he leaving us on our own? Is he telling us "y'all be careful now?" I don't think so. I think what Paul is really saying to us is very simple. Your salvation is something that you need to take extremely seriously. Work it out with fear. Another word for that might be awe. Work it out with the awe and reverence that it is due and work it out with trembling. That is to say, work it out with the sincerity of something that is deep within you because that's what this is all about. The spirituality that Paul is trying to get in the church in Philippi or the church in Philippi to recognize within itself is the spirituality that is centered in Christ. A spirituality that models the very existence of Christ and that model is the very example of Christ, its humility and seriousness. If there is any encouragement in Christ, if you find anything that is helpful in the words of Jesus Christ, if there is any consolation from love, if you have ever been loved and know what that feels like, if there's ever been any sharing in the spirit, if your spirit has ever been nurtured by the spirit of another in the name of Christ, if there has been ever any compassion or sympathy shown you in your life, make my joy complete. Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Paul is talking about complete joy. We often times don't see that complete joy and I think the reason is because we don't have the same mind that is in Christ.

You notice that Paul doesn't address any of the stuff that is going to happen to us, not the stuff that might happen to us, the stuff that is going to happen to us that happens to everybody, the stuff that makes our lives sometimes very hectic and frantic, the things that happen to us when we get that questionable diagnoses or when we get the pink slip at the office. All of those things happen to everyone, but complete joy is not based upon circumstance, it is based upon a true understanding of who Christ is and being of the same mind that Christ was in. It is being in touch with God, being a servant of God, serving one another, thinking of others as higher or better. It is putting the other first.

Working out one's salvation with fear and trembling means knowing fully who Christ is and being like Christ. It's not about happiness. It's about joy. I think I heard once upon a time that the word happiness has the same root as happenstance, but joy doesn't. Joy is not based upon circumstance. Joy is based upon true knowledge of Christ and being like Christ.

We need to take stock. We need to take a physical from time not just of our physical buildings, but of our true spiritual growth, of our true spiritual lives. How healthy are we spiritually, because the outward and visible signs reflect the inward and spiritual grace. My prayer for us as a church is that we would begin to see that and begin to live that so that we could begin to truly experience complete joy. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!