

“Complete Joy”

Psalm 133 and Philippians 2:1-4

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“How are you doing?” This common greeting usually gets a variety of socially acceptable, polite answers. “I’m doing well, thank you.” “Doing good, and you?” Or perhaps, “I’m OK, under the circumstances.”

I want to reflect on this common phrase, “Under the circumstances.” Think of the visual image this suggests. Up here, above us, are the circumstances of our lives. They are a weight, sitting on top of us. They press down on us. We are living under them. We have to carry these unfortunate circumstances. We are doing “OK, under the circumstances.” What if we could learn to live our lives joyfully *in spite of* our personal circumstances? What if we lived so connected to our community of faith that our circumstances no longer felt like a burden we must bear alone? What if we helped each bear the load of the circumstances pressing us down, keeping us anxious and upset? Is that possible? The Apostle Paul, in his happiest letter—Philippians—talks about living with complete joy. Let’s explore how he believes we can achieve this.

*“If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, **2** make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. **3** Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. **4** Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:1-4)*

Two hikers are standing on top of a huge cliff gazing across the panorama of a beautiful valley. One turns to the other and says, “Isn’t it amazing! The beauty of creation.” The other says, “Yes, it is.” The first one says, “A sight like this stirs my faith in God the Creator.” The second one says, “Indeed, God is good!” The first responds and says, “All the time!” One says to the other, “Are you a Christian?” He responds, “I am.” The first one asks, “What kind of church do you attend?” The other answers, “An Independent Evangelical Church.” The second says, “So do I!” The conversation continues.

“What kind of Independent Evangelical Church? West Coast or East Coast?” “West Coast.” “So am I! What kind of West Coast Independent Evangelical Church? Baptized in the Spirit or not?” “Yes, I’m a baptized in the Spirit, West Coast, Independent Evangelical Church member.” “Praise the Lord! So am I! Are you a bathed in the blood, Bible believing, baptized in the Spirit, West Coast Independent Evangelical Church?” “Yes.” “So am I! Are you a bathed in the blood, Bible believing, baptized in the Spirit, West Coast Independent Evangelical church member,

weekly Lord's Supper or monthly Lord's Supper?" "We are a weekly Lord's Supper church." He shoves him off the cliff, "Die, Heretic!"

Let's be honest. We American Protestant Christians have a history of dividing ourselves with multiple break aways that separate us. We choose different churches based on our opinions and preferences. As a result, we have Baptists and Lutherans, Pentecostals and Presbyterians. Even within denominations, we have divisions and groups that refuse to be reconciled. What separates Baptists from Episcopalians, Lutherans from Presbyterians? While we might assume it is mostly theology, actually most of the differences are rooted in personality and culture.

Going back a couple hundred years most American denominations reflected the homeland traditions of different European nationalities. The Scots came to America as Presbyterians and the Norwegians brought their Lutheranism with them. The British arrived as Episcopalians and the Italians and Irish were Catholic. Nineteenth century American denominations understood and accepted this cultural basis of denominational differences.

In the mid-twentieth century, Richard Niebuhr wrote a book presenting a fresh theory about how churches became divided and held different views. He suggested that socioeconomic differences had become the distinguishing aspects of American churches. Niebuhr argued in his book, *Christ and Culture*, that Pentecostals mostly came from the lower economic levels of society, while Episcopalians came from the wealthier levels. He reasoned that this explained why different churches reached different groups of people. By the end of the twentieth century, however, many churches were breaking out of these traditional socioeconomic boundaries. Pentecostal churches saw many well-educated professionals joining as new members. Episcopal parishes served some of the poorest in inner city congregations.

Keith Miller, a popular Christian author near the end of the twentieth century, suggested an alternate theory for the differences in churches. He suggested that different churches tend to meet different needs on Maslow's hierarchy ladder of needs. Abraham Maslow suggested that people have a ladder of needs going from basic physical needs to social needs, intellectual needs to aesthetic needs. Miller suggested that some denominations meet basic human physical needs. Other denominations focus on social and intellectual needs. Still others serve the needs of those who are at the top of the ladder.

This analysis helps us appreciate why people change churches according to their life circumstances. People who are doing well and feel secure in their circumstances tend to attend a church that serves the higher rungs on Maslow's ladder. However, when they hit stressful, crisis times and become insecure they may move to a church that serves lower needs on the ladder.

Analyzing these tendencies in congregations can help us accept each other and different churches. It turns out that while we tend to act as though our disagreements are matters of faith and doctrine, most of our disagreements are merely differences due to life stages and circumstances. Might these insights help us move toward Paul's image of complete joy?

These two words “complete” and joy” are used together only a few times in the entire New Testament. We find them three times in Jesus’ last teachings in John’s gospel where he commands the disciples to love each other (chapters 15-17). After this repetitious use, we find these words in only a couple of other places. A careful study of the context reveals that “complete joy” generally happens after there have been hurt feelings, misunderstandings, jealousy, and the need for reconciliation. Relationships generally start with liking each other and sharing common interests. However, there will come moments over long-term relationships when we discover that we are really different from each other and have some strong disagreements. We may disagree so strongly that we hurt each other. Only after reconciling these kinds of hurt feelings can we break through to complete joy.

Surface joy happens easily. It can be felt when we make the first blush discovery of our similarities. “You like pizza? So do I!” More joy happens when we are willing to work together for a common goal. “Let’s volunteer together to feed the unhoused on Friday night.” Complete joy, however, happens only after we have to work at understanding and loving those who are different from us and may have even hurt us.

Kate and I had such an experience years ago while on a Christian tour in Israel. The first day on the bus was a day of joy. We discovered that we had several Catholics, a few Methodists, some Presbyterians, a few Baptists and a couple of Lutherans on the tour bus. What a wonderful thing that Christians of different stripes can travel together and love each other.

By the second day, however, we discovered that the Catholics planned to have daily Mass at various holy places. During the first Catholic service we Protestants tried to attend, but we were told that we were not welcome. Tensions grew over the next few days as we Protestants were forced to wait outside by the bus while the Catholics performed a Mass each day at various holy sites. After several days of grumbling by we Protestants, it went toxic. An argument broke out between a Presbyterian and a Catholic. Some of the Protestants had been staying a couple minutes too long at an archeological site while the Catholics were waiting on the bus, anxious to go to the next holy site for their daily Mass. “We have to wait for you while you do your Mass each day, with nothing to do. And You criticize us for a couple extra minutes at that interesting site!” the Presbyterian lady announced angrily. “You knew when you came on our Catholic tour bus that we would be having Mass each day!” As both sides calmed down, we discovered the tour company had published two different brochures about the trip. The Catholics had been promised daily Mass at Holy Sites. They assumed we Protestants were doing something else while they were at Mass. They were shocked to learn we had simply stood around the bus waiting with nothing else to do. We eventually resolved the tension by dropping off the Catholics for their Mass while we Protestants took some alternate short trips.

Near the end of our trip, the tour company made arrangements for the Protestants to share communion at the traditional location of the Upper Room. We explained to the Catholics on the bus that we would be celebrating our Lord’s Supper while they took their own short tour. As we climbed off the tour bus and headed into the location, we were stunned as one of the Catholic priests got off the bus and joined us. He explained that he was taking a big risk among

his own people by partaking in our service, but he wanted to express a desire for reconciliation and unity. As we passed the elements of bread and cup that day, we caught a glimpse of what complete joy could be.

The service that day was simple. Eighteen of us formed a worship circle in the Upper Room. I shared a devotional word, then a Methodist pastor pronounced the traditional words of institution over the elements of bread and cup. We passed the bread and cup around the circle as we served each other. The Catholic priest received the elements with us and served the person next to him. We appreciated he would likely get in major trouble with his very conservative congregation for doing this. It was really impressive. It was holy and wonderful.

Then it happened. The elements made it around the entire circle and came to the last couple, a pastor of a smaller exclusive Lutheran denomination and his wife. We watched in astonishment, as they turned their backs on the rest of us so he could whisper some words over the bread and cup. They made it clear that they did not believe the rest of us had properly blessed the communion elements. For it to be real communion, it had to be done their particular way. Their communion was not our communion.

Oh, we still had joy. The Catholic priest had taken a huge risk with his people to show his connection with us. It was joy. But we missed out on complete joy.

No wonder Paul reminds the Philippians and us that joy remains partial until we work at reconciling our relationships. Love takes work. Unity involves taking risks. But it can result in a more complete joy.

Jesus said that wherever two or three of his followers agree on something he would be with them. I think he meant, "If two of you hurt each other, confess your fault, forgive, work at the relationship and seek love, I will show up to be part of that!"

Does anyone come to mind with whom you need to be reconciled? Jesus wants us to share complete joy.