

“Pollyanna Christianity”

Hebrews 12: 1-2 and Philippians 4:4-8

Market Square Presbyterian Church

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When I used to drop off our children at school I had a phrase that drove them crazy. As they were exiting the car I would call out, “Make it a good day!” Through their middle school and high school years they would argue, “I can’t MAKE it a good day. It will either be good or bad. I have no choice.” I would discuss that no matter the circumstances, we always have a choice as to our responses. We can choose to let things take us down or choose to rise above them. I guess I was trying to teach them Pollyanna’s version of Bible truths. Probably the best passage for Pollyanna Christians is Philippians 4. Particularly verses 4-8.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Many of us can relate to the mother whose son, Zachary, age 4, came running out of the bathroom, upset that his toothbrush had dropped into the toilet. The mother fished out the toothbrush and then tossed it into the garbage. When Zachary wondered why she had thrown it away, the mother explained that it was dirty from being in the toilet water. The boy then ran to his parents’ bathroom. She followed to see what he was doing. He held up her toothbrush and said with a smile, “We better throw this one out too. I accidentally knocked it into your toilet a few days ago.”

Most of us can laugh at such little frustrations of life. Toothbrushes in toilets are not the end of the world. It is fairly easy to be glad when soiled toothbrushes are the biggest sorrow in life. But what about the really big hurts? Divorce, betrayal, loss of job, serious illness. These test our attitudes. Let me suggest one way to live into the more positive attitudes of Philippians 4 is to play the “glad game” from the classic book *Pollyanna*.

Many have a negative feeling toward Pollyanna. Her name is often associated with being naive, overly romantic, saccharine, and, to quote Hozier’s popular song, *Too Sweet*. Let me suggest we take another look at Pollyanna.

The book *Pollyanna*, written over a hundred years ago (1913), has become an American classic with sales of over a million copies. This bestseller was turned into a Broadway play and a Disney movie. The name *Pollyanna* became synonymous with positive thinking and excessive optimism. In fact, within a few years of its publication, the book led to the developing of “glad clubs” in schools around our country. Let me give a quick review of the basic story of Pollyanna.

At age eleven Pollyanna is left an orphan when her missionary parents die. Her wealthy Aunt Polly makes arrangements for Pollyanna to live with her. The aunt is a bitter, controlling personality. She makes it clear that Pollyanna is to act properly and not embarrass her. The story quickly moves from Pollyanna’s relationship with her stern aunt to Pollyanna’s positive influence on the rest of the community.

Pollyanna influences others by inviting them to join her in playing a game her father taught her. She calls it the “glad game.” She first learned it when a Christmas missionary box arrived with a pair of crutches instead of a doll for Pollyanna. Seeing his daughter’s sadness, her father suggested that they play a game and try to put a positive spin on the situation. What could they think of to be glad about the fact that they got crutches? They decide that Pollyanna can be glad that she doesn’t need the crutches. She learns to handle difficult situations by playing this glad game, always looking for the positive.

For me, the key scene in the book and movie is Pollyanna talking to the preacher as he prepares his Palm Sunday sermon. The Reverend Paul Ford is planning to preach about Jesus’ anger on Holy Week. Jesus not only cleansed the temple by casting out the money changers, but he also delivered his most scathing words against the religious leaders of the day. The pastor reads from Matthew 23, “Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”

Pollyanna listens briefly as the pastor rehearses how to chasten his Palm Sunday congregation. When he comes to a break, she asks if he likes his job. She recalls that her dad liked being a missionary. As the Reverend Ford listens, she explains that her dad would have quit the ministry if it hadn’t been for the “rejoicing texts” of the Bible. She says that her father once counted the number of times the Bible tells us to focus on the positive by being joyful, rejoicing and being glad. Her father counted eight hundred places where these words appear in the Bible. Her father decided that God must have meant for us to focus on the positive if this idea is so prevalent in the scriptures. As a result of her comments, the Reverend Ford decides to refocus his message on the positive power of Jesus Christ.

Jesus knew what he was doing as he entered the last week of his life. He knew he was facing rejection, persecution, betrayal, and even death. Yet the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus willingly sacrificed himself and faced these horrible sorrows because he focused on “the joy that was set before him.”

The Apostle Paul challenges us to do the same thing. As we follow Jesus, we can choose whether to focus on sadness and victimhood or joy and purpose. The former leads to a life of bitterness. The latter brings healing.

The Apostle Paul ties in the idea of joy with the spiritual practices of thankfulness, counting our blessings, choosing a positive attitude. These mental disciplines happen as a result of our prayer life and keeping a close connection with God. We practice gentleness with others, offering compassion and seeking to appreciate them even in their brokenness. As we pray thankfully letting our requests be known to God, we experience the healing Holy Spirit moving our hearts toward joy.

There is an old rabbinic tale that makes this same point. According to the legend there were two brothers who inherited their family farm. They worked side by side and lived next door to each other. They agreed not only to share the work of the farm but to evenly distribute the harvest each year. Thus, every year the two brothers stored their evenly divided harvest in two barns, one next to each house.

Now, one brother was married with several children while the other brother remained single. One evening the single brother got to thinking about his brother's life. He realized how blessed he was to have so large a storage of grain. He thought to himself, "My future is secure. Since I only have to provide for myself, I already have plenty. My brother, however, has to care for his large family. I will take some of my grain and secretly move it to his barn so that he will have enough for his children."

That same evening, the other brother was counting his blessings as well. He thought about how blessed he was to have so many children. He was concerned for his single brother. "I have my children to care for me in my old age, but my brother must rely entirely on his accumulated wealth. He will need more of the harvest than I do. I will take some of my grain and secretly move it to his barn."

So that evening, the two brothers were each carrying sacks of grain from their own barn to the other's barn when they met each other. As they stood face to face, realizing that each was giving more to the other a miracle happened. Even though it was a cloudless night, it began to rain a gentle rain. The rain drops, according to the rabbis, were the tears of God. God was weeping for joy that these brothers were living the way God wants us to live.

Whether we are happy or sad depends on our attitude. Victory is found in our own hearts and minds. This week, whatever our circumstances, I invite us to join Pollyanna's glad game. Or as the Apostle says to the Philippian Christians, "Rejoice in the Lord, again I say rejoice."