

Wesley United Methodist Church
September 27, 2020
Living With Christ -Joy
Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Do you ever find yourself suddenly humming or singing a hymn that speaks to you? I know that I do. I imagine that most of us have situations or occasions that bring a hymn to mind. If we pay close attention, we are likely to discover that the hymn that we think about is a good indication of what we believe about God.

In those times when I might be feeling discouraged or sad, I sometimes find myself humming, "There's something about that name." The words to that song are simple. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, There's just something about that name. Master, Savior, Jesus, Like the fragrance after the rain. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Let all heaven and earth proclaim. Kings and kingdoms shall all pass away, but there's just something about that name."ⁱ

For me, these words proclaim the consistency, dependability and comfort of being able to call upon Jesus especially in those times when I may be without words and just need comfort.

Today, in our scripture we heard one of those songs. It's probably one of the oldest hymns that we have. Paul was imprisoned in Rome, likely under house arrest around the year 60 A.D. quite possibly facing death when he wrote the letter to the church at Philippi. He was finally released and was able to travel again to some of the churches that he loved. But within a couple of years he was again arrested and killed at the order of Emperor Nero.

But as he writes to the church in Philippi, he uses the words of one of the earliest songs about Jesus, likely becoming known within 10-15 years of Jesus' death and resurrection. Now 45-50 years later, Paul draws upon that hymn to give words to what he believes.

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at attributes of living with Christ; things that help to describe our lives as followers of Jesus. We've talked about love, peace, and grace; not only about how we receive these but also how we share them with others. Today, in our last week, we focus on joy.

Joy is not to be confused with happiness or with a fleeting temporary emotion. It is much more a state of being. It doesn't mean that we are never sad or discouraged. It doesn't mean we are never angry or afraid. But overall, what it means is that there is a certain kind of joy in our lives when we are followers of Jesus; when we seek to live our lives in ways that he calls us to live, in ways that he guides and strengthens and empowers us.

Here is Paul in prison, now knowing if the verdict will be that he will be set free or that he will be killed for teaching about Jesus, and yet, he is talking about joy. This is a huge transformation for Paul, because earlier in his life he had been one of the people who persecuted followers of Jesus. He talks about this joy, and also love, peace, and grace, as ways that we who claim the name Christian should live, not only when things are going well, but every day, everywhere, and with everybody. That's a real challenge and one that we undoubtedly fall short of on a regular basis. At least, I know that I do.

Here he is encouraging us to have the same mind that Christ had – to imitate him in the way he lived and the way he interacted with other people. He is challenging us to live in such a way that other people can see Christ reflected in our lives. Paul, after being a persecutor of Jesus' followers, now has such love in him that he wants everyone to know about Jesus. He says that his joy will be complete when the people to whom he is writing share in that same love, peace, grace, and joy. He wants this not for himself, but for them. He wants them to know what he has come to know.

Think about it this way. If you discover a great restaurant, or a wonderful new television show, or a really insightful book and you get excited about it, aren't you likely to tell others about it. You want others to know about it so that they can experience it for themselves. Then think for a minute, how much greater is knowing God's love, knowing the strength that comes from God, knowing and experiencing the peace that can be found even in the most difficult time. Isn't that something that you would want to share with others – not for yourself, but so that they can also experience it.

This is what Paul wants for the Philippians. This is what he would want for us. After telling them that they should find unity and relationship with each other by having the same mind in them that is in Jesus, he goes on to quote the early church hymn.

I suggested earlier that when a hymn or song often comes to us at certain times, it likely says something to us about what we believe, or what we are looking for right then. So, too, the song that Paul shares is one that describes what Jesus was like.

It begins by saying that Jesus didn't regard being equal with God as something he should exploit, but rather that he emptied himself by putting the needs of others before his and became like a servant. Because he was born as a human, he experienced everything that went with being human, including dying when he was nailed to a cross.

It's not really surprising that Jesus did not try to take advantage of being like God, because if we really look at our scripture we discover that God's actions are about the betterment of others, about others being all that they have been created to be. Over and over again, God is concerned with justice, with peace, and with all of creation flourishing. God doesn't exploit power but rather God is love.ⁱⁱ

I understand that all too often in churches we have heard about a God of judgment, and I have known people who were afraid to die because they were afraid of meeting a God who they thought would judge them and condemn them to hell. Friends, I want to tell you, that with every bone of my body, I believe that God is not sitting around waiting to judge us for something we did wrong – especially something we did a long time ago. Yes, there are times when we hear about God's judgment, but most often it is not a punishment by God, but rather a logical consequence of our behavior.

Repeatedly, in the Bible, we hear about God being like a mother watching over her children, being like a father running to meet the child who has strayed away, being like a shepherd taking care of his sheep. God is invested in our life here on earth. So it is not surprising that Jesus does not take advantage of being equal with God. Rather Jesus shows us that equality by also being passionate about those who suffer, those who experience injustice, those who are lonely or considered outsiders by others.

In 2004, Mel Gibson produced a movie called "The Passion of Christ". It was all about the days and hours leading up to the cross. It was all about how painful and agonizing the crucifixion was. I would suggest to you, that Jesus' death was not the passion of Christ, but rather than the passion of Christ is what led up to his crucifixion.

His passion was to be “Immanuel” – God with us. His passion was for justice, inclusion, love and joy. He was extremely sensitive to the needs of those who were most vulnerable.

In this passion, he emptied himself, as Paul notes in the hymn. He was not focused on himself, but on others. He was not looking out for his own self-interest but rather was looking for what was best for all those around him.

I would suggest to us, that this is what we are called to be and do today. We are called to know the joy that comes from wanting others to know Christ. We are called to know the joy that comes from helping others to experience justice. We are called to know the joy that comes from feeding those who are hungry and helping those without shelter to have a place of safety and protection. We are called to know the joy that comes from knowing that Jesus is present in our lives.

Mohandas Gandhi is credited with saying, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” In today’s world, it is painful to see how often Christians are so unlike Christ. It is painful to see and hear the judgment that comes from the mouths of some who profess to be Christian. It is heartbreaking to hear the callousness with which some who profess to be Christian treat those who most need to be treated with some compassion and love.

I pray that we may seek to be imitators of Christ so that others may come to know Christ. I pray that we may seek to have the same mind and attitude that Jesus had, so that others may come to see Christ in the world through us. I pray that we may open our hearts and lives daily so that we may recognize and experience Christ in our lives.

The story is told of a little boy who was “given a priceless possession, his deceased grandfather’s gold pocket watch. How he treasured it! But one day, while playing at his father’s ice plant, he lost the watch amid all the ice and sawdust. He searched and searched, becoming frantic, but no watch. Then he suddenly realized what to do. He stopped scurrying around and became very still. In the silence, he heard the watch ticking.

“God has given each of us a priceless gift of joy in Jesus. How easy it is to lose our joy in the scurrying around of life. Yet it is always there to find, if we will but pause and listen to the beautiful presence of Jesus in our hearts.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Let us pray:

Our loving God, you want your people to know the love, peace, grace, and joy of living in and through you, of walking every day in the path where you lead us, of treating each person as you would treat them. Open our eyes, our ears, our hearts to see the places where you are calling us to be your hands and feet, where you are calling us to be agents of your love, peace, grace, and joy. Show us how to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to have the same mind that was in him, so that we may love as you love. Amen.

ⁱ Gaither, Gloria & William J. “There’s Something About That Name”, 1970. United Methodist Hymnal #171

ⁱⁱ Some of this is found in Feasting on the Word in the Theological exposition on Philippians 2:1-13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hewett, James S. Editor, Illustrations Unlimited p. 284. Tyndale Publishers, 1988