

"The Letter of Joy"

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Philippians 1:1-2

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is often called, "The Epistle of Joy." This short letter uses the words "joy" and "rejoice" more than any other book in the Bible, 16 times. This is rather remarkable considering Paul wrote this letter while in prison (for preaching the Gospel). It's in the Letters section of the New Testament. There are three major sections in the New Testament - Gospels, Acts, Letters (to 1st Century churches and their leaders).

Paul writes this Letter to the Philippians for these reasons:

1. To thank them for a gift he's received from them (Phil 4:10-11).
2. To instruct them to receive Epaphroditus back into their fellowship (Phil. 2:29-30). Paul sent him back to Philippi for having an unpronounceable name! Actually Mr. E. was ill and Paul urged him to return to his home. "E" was supposed to stay with Paul to assist him in his time of imprisonment. Paul wanted to make sure that the Philippians knew that Epaphroditus had not deserted Paul.
3. To encourage them during their time of trials & persecutions (Phil. 1:28-30).
4. To appeal for unity. Chapters 2 & 3 deal with this subject.

An early Christian writer named Polycarp was well aware of Paul's letters to the Philippians. He once wrote to them, "when he (Paul) was absent he wrote letters to you." (I always get a kick out of the tarp company named, "Polytarp." Their founder must have studied early church history!)

Philippians 1:1-2

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who am I? It's one of life's most basic questions. How we answer that question is simple some days and complicated on other days. I faced this question 3 weeks ago when creating a blog, an online Bible Study of this book of the Bible. I had to describe myself as the blog administrator. Surprisingly this was not an easy task for me. "I'm a guy. I live in North Andover. I like sports and Christianity and I love my family." Actually I wrote this: Husband of Alisa, Father to Ben, Sam & Maddie. Pastor of Trinitarian Congregational Church, North Andover, MA. Saved by Grace, Blessed with Joy. Child of God. Member of Red Sox Nation.

Some say that our identity is simply the sum total of the roles we have in life - husband/wife, mother/father, son/daughter, brother/sister, friend, pastor, neighbor, church member, member of this club or that club, etc. We each have a number of roles we're trying to fulfill. The only problem with all these roles is what if you're an onion!! What if you take away all those roles and there's nothing left! You peel each role away and there's no core in the middle!

I'm reading an interesting book by David Gergen called Eyewitness to Power. Gergen is now a political commentator on CNN. He's well suited for the job because he served in the White House under 4 different presidents - Nixon, Ford, Reagan & Clinton. In his book he tries to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each president in a balanced, nonpartisan way. He writes favorably of President Clinton and his accomplishments and his giftedness (brilliant mind, caring & compassionate, resilient and so on). But he also reflects on Clinton's weaknesses, which led to scandal and impeachment. (I don't mean this as a political statement at all. I'm not a political preacher!) David Gergen says that Clinton lacks "an inner compass." "He has 360-degree vision but no true north. He isn't yet fully grounded within." Fully grounded within. That's the issue of a core identity.

The Apostle Paul gives us two core identities to think about this morning. One is what he calls himself and Timothy. The other is what he calls the Philippians. He calls himself simply a "servant" of Christ Jesus. He calls the Philippians, "saints." That's a beautiful example of humility, isn't it? Paul wrote to the Romans, "honor one another above yourselves." (Romans 12:10) He practiced what he preached. He looked at himself as a servant. He looked at them as saints. That would be a nice

way to try and live this week, wouldn't it? To view yourself as a Servant of Christ. And to view others as Saints.

The word for saint is, "hagioi" means "set apart,"- set apart for a special purpose. You probably have things in your home that are set apart for a special purpose. My Great Grandmother's China was set apart in the china cabinet only to used for very special occasions. Years ago people had formal living rooms that were set apart for only very special company. (& never for kids us kids - "Don't you go in there!") "Hagioi" means set apart for a very special purpose. Paul calls all Christians, "Saints," because we're all set apart and given the special purpose of glorifying God, honoring God, serving Christ and carrying on his ministry in our day and age. All Christians are saints because we all have a Sacred Purpose - to glorify God. So that's one core identity he offers us. The other is "Servant."

"Doulos" is the Greek word he uses that is translated servant in the NRSV Bible. Slave is also an accurate translation of the word. That's not an analogy that we're comfortable with. But for Paul it meant this - he belonged to Christ.

Let me close with a story and a poem that illustrate the power of having an identity rooted and grounded in Christ.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a day he met a man named Ben Hooper. Mr. Hooper was having breakfast at a table next to Professor Craddock and his wife. They struck up a conversation and it came out that Craddock was a preacher. "I've got a story to tell you about a preacher. And he told him about growing up in a small town in the Bible belt, and that his mother was a very colorful character in the town and she was not married when Ben Hooper was born, which back then in the Bible Belt was absolutely scandalous. When Ben was a child he began to attend a Baptist Church next to the apartment where he and his mother lived. He enjoyed the service but used to sneak out to avoid talking with anyone. One Sunday he got held up in the crowd and couldn't get out in time. It was then that he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was the preacher's hand. The pastor said, "Now boy, I know you. You've been coming to our services for a while now. "I think I know who you are. Why boy, you're a child of . . . ?" (in the south you're often referred to as Jesse's boy, Joe's son) "Why boy, you're a child of?" - and then he remembered who he was and what people

said about him. "Why boy, you're a child of God. And I see a striking resemblance. Now go, Son, claim your inheritance."

Ben Hooper claimed his inheritance, his identity as a child of God. He went to college, became an attorney, went into politics and became a two-term governor of Tennessee. He got a new identity that day in church. And that made all the difference.

Bonhoeffer's - Who Am I

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young theologian of great promise, was martyred by the Nazis for his participation in a plot against the life of Adolf Hitler. In the prison camps Bonhoeffer became a chaplain to other prisoners. As you'll read below he wrestled with peoples' impressions of him versus what he was often feeling inside. In doing though he resolved the identity question in a very faith-filled, God-centered way.)

*Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my wardens
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equally, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events,*

*Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?*

*Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!*

D. Bonhoeffer
March 4, 1946

Amen.