

“Being Subversive”

Sunday, October 15th, 2017

19th Sunday after Pentecost

 **Philippians 4:1, 4-9 (NRSV)**

[Read from NRSV Bible]

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

In my bulletin article this morning, I talk about the fun we had as kids playing spy games.

The Cold-War Era inspired lots of kids to want to be spies and work on ways to subvert our enemies.

Being subversive in that context was being imaginative and carried no real danger.

We're all grown up now and our games and their rules have changed.

The culture in which we live seems different, although many say that society doesn't change, only our response to it changes.

At any rate, there appears to be much about our world that runs count to the Gospel.

As a rebel in *his* culture, Jesus cried out for subversive activities like loving your enemy and caring for everyone.

Today, we are challenged to also be subversive as we follow Jesus and live counter to our culture.

The question is, what does it mean to be subversive?

Let us pray... Lord, help us to notice our place in the world; where we fit and where we do not. Guide us to be subversive where we encounter selfishness, injustice, and all forms of evil in the world. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

[MESSAGE]

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul says.

My guess is that this is often easier said than done.

Being joyful in all circumstances requires us to recognize God's action even amid difficulty and pain in our lives.

This is counter-cultural.

We tend to think of joy as an emotional overflow of good feelings in response to happy circumstances.

It is an individual response, independent of anyone else's feelings.

Joy is the whole point of life; it is our “**right**,” as in: “*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*”

Paul has a different perspective on joy.

Joy is shared, not individual; it is incomplete unless it is shared.

It is a byproduct, not an end in itself; it is not the goal, as if it were a drug.

Joy is a discipline, not a right.

It is a command, not an option.

You may be familiar with the tradition of flying the British flag over Buckingham Palace to indicate the Queen is in residence.

Joy serves a similar purpose for the church.

Joy is an outcome and a sign of the presence of the Risen Jesus Christ.

Our joy, as Christians and as a congregation, is a sign that Jesus has taken up residence with us and is guiding our mission and ministry.

When things are going great, our joy should be apparent; when things are not so great, our joy must shine more brightly.

I think we too often view joy as an emotion we experience.

We need to realize that true joy is a practiced discipline of how we perceive circumstances.

Stephen Fowl, theology professor at Loyola University, calls joy: *“response formed in those who can read the economy of God’s activity in particular ways and are able to act in conformity with that unfolding story.”*ⁱ

Where we see God’s action is not always obvious and often runs counter to our expectations.

Paul's prison cell seems like an unlikely place from which to preach the Good News; yet Paul rejoices in it.

He tells the Philippians that they are to rejoice in whatever opposition they face.

Christian joy is subversive because it overturns threatening situations and frustrates those with selfish plans.

Remember Proverbs 25:21-22 - *"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*

The idea is to offer our enemies an unexpected response to upend their motivation to harm us.

When our enemies are the unseen forces of evil, our joy is a spiritual discipline that confounds.

When our hardship grows out of grief or illness, joy strengthens us to combat what we can and endure what we cannot change.

“Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective.” ⁱⁱ

Paul connects prayer with joy in the Lord.

They are part of our relationship with God, not just techniques to be practiced.

When we notice and rejoice in the living, unexpected presence of God, even in the most difficult of circumstances, we can let go of trying to be our own savior.

Instead of worrying about “*anything*,” the Philippians are to bring “*everything*” to God.

All the “*anythings*” and “*everything*s” in our lives can become the sources of endless worry.

OR, they can become the things of prayer.

Either way, they are important; the variable is our response: *Worry or pray? Despair or rejoice?*

Like joy, prayer is not an escape, but a practice of regarding a painful situation from another angle,

one open to multiple resolutions that God allows us to consider.

Letting go of worry takes disciplined action and attention, not numb acceptance of things as they are.

Paul ends this section with sound advice on how to make our joy in the Lord an effective, visible habit.

“Finally, beloved, 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.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” (vs 8-9)

We learn what is true, honorable, just, and pure from the example of Jesus Christ; whenever we see those things manifest in the world, encourage and support them.

Wherever we see excellence or actions worthy of praise, praise them; find joy in them.

Keep on doing the things you've been taught are the right things; keep finding joy in that.

View your struggles as opportunities for God to be with you, to transform you.

Really, the foundation of this text is that God is near. (V 5)

I love that Paul begins his letter to the Philippians with affirmation of the church; this section leads-off with, *“my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.”*

It reminds me that we must always rejoice in each other, in our church, and in the work that God has called us to do.

It binds us together through our joy and demonstrates that we are intertwined in this unfolding drama God is working in the lives of

all, through the unlikeliest of people and circumstances.

It helps us to appreciate one another as sojourners together and empowers us to shout with joy at all time and in all places.

The dictionary defines “subversive” as: seeking or intended to subvert an established system or institution.

Synonyms for this word as a noun include: troublemaker, dissident, agitator, revolutionary, renegade, rebel.

If Christians truly follow the example of Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves being described in those terms.

Let us go forth with JOY and be subversive!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ Stephen Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005) 181

ⁱⁱ Nathan Eddy, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 161.