

Sermon Text for January 10, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 50:19-21, Philippians 1:1-2

“Grace to you”

So we begin a new year in the midst of a pandemic. We begin a new year in the midst of civil unrest which has wracked our country throughout the entire pandemic but found a traitorous voice on Wednesday. We begin a new sermon series as we move out of the lectionary and back into a book of the Bible, one of the books of the Bible that you suggested, Philippians. I have entitled this sermon series “Surprised by Joy”. It isn’t an original title. C.S. Lewis wrote a book with the same title but his book depicted his transition from unbelief to belief and how belief in Jesus Christ has at its core a joy that isn’t fleeting but a fundamental part of our being.

His book title came from a poem by William Wordsworth where he writes how he was surprised he could feel any joy at all after the death of his daughters. One day he unexpectedly found joy even in the midst of his grief. The reason I am choosing this title is really for neither C.S. Lewis nor Wordsworth, but rather because we find ourselves in a time in our history individually and collectively where joy is not the overarching theme of our existence. The deaths that are before us in the pandemic, scaling towards 400,000, the chaos in which this administration has left us politically, and the unfulfilled desire in all of us to gather together again in this sanctuary leave us wanting.

Joy is not a theme well chosen, one would think. But if we would just give God’s Word a chance, I think we just might over the period of these few months as we begin to come out of the worst period in our collective history, we just might be surprised by joy if we are aware enough to notice it. Philippians has at its core a nod to joy that surpasses any and all environmental instances in which we find ourselves. Joy ought to supersede even the pain, the anger, the betrayal that some are feeling now, if we would just focus on the risen Jesus Christ.

We find in Philippians in the midst of suffering and uncertainty the theme of joy emerges quite clearly and remarkably. It can be a blessing to us if we would just allow it. Today I have paired our first reading in this letter that Paul writes with a Scripture from the Old Testament that I believe portrays one of the most powerful acts of human grace of one human towards another. But why grace? Because before Paul gets to joy he begins his letters with not only words of grace, but the actual word grace itself. Just so that we are all on the same page, we are using as a definition for grace that which the Harper’s Bible Dictionary uses which is: that which brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune. Grace is your having kindness toward someone else. It

is you doing something to make someone else feel good and not about you feeling good about yourself. Let's read.

READ

The Joseph Scripture that we read almost always takes my breath away when I read it. I know it well, we have studied it together both in a sermon series in Genesis to our 90 day challenges where we addressed this Scripture. There is no other display of grace more powerful I all of Scripture than what we read, except maybe what Esau displayed to Jacob when they met for the first time after Jacob had betrayed him.

The stage is set where Joseph has immeasurable power. He is the second in charge of the most powerful nation on the earth and his brothers had sold him into slavery early on and he had been in prison, sold into slavery, lived a life of suffering that was very significant all at the hands of his brothers who had started that ball rolling. He becomes the second most powerful man on earth and as a result is able to save his family from starvation. His father dies and his brothers are terrified because without the father to protect them, Joseph would never kill his brothers who had betrayed him while his father was living, but now that he had died it would be normal for him to repay them for their deeds.

He tells them: Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good. Joseph as the leader of the people was not looking to get any of the credit. Joseph the ruler of the people was not looking to claim any credit for his position of power over his brothers, he was directed their gaze to God who placed him there. It was not his place to claim his rule over his brothers, but rather he recognized the grace that God had shown him by keeping him alive and putting him in that position and so he was able to show grace to his brothers as a result. We can show grace only as far as we have experienced grace ourselves from God. If you think you are in a position of power that you are in from your own gifts and talents then you will not know how to show grace to others. If you understand the grace that it took to send your only son into the world in order to die for the world, then you can show grace to others.

Joseph as a ruler could show grace because he experienced it even in the midst of life threatening realities. He could have easily have had all of his brothers killed. All he had to do was say the word and any of the Egyptians around him would have carried out his commands. That's what lackeys do, they carry out the commands of the godless. But not here, Joseph who had more power than anyone on earth, understood that it was only by the grace of God, and so he extends grace.

The role that we can play in the lives of people is not insignificant. We had officer training yesterday and I said that as leaders we are called to be servants. Because the words that we say and the actions that we take are going to be interpreted by people that we serve and they will be emulated. Leaders in the church and leaders in society and culture have an impact on those around them. I am not naïve enough to think that my words do not have an impact on people. I can encourage people to do good, and I can also encourage people to do evil and make it look like it is good. When a pastor is unhappy he can lead the church astray and think that it is for the good of the church when it is simply for the good of his own ego.

If a pastor feels mistreated then he or she can divide a church thinking that it is for the good of the church, but there is never a time when that is justified. What is said about a pastor can be said about any person in power, like Joseph was in power. What makes us different from other countries is the miracle of a peaceful transition to power. We proved to the world that we are godless nation on Wednesday. What disturbed me the most on Wednesday was as we saw cop killers storming and traitors storming the capitol I saw more shirts and hats proclaiming to be followers of Christ. I heard Waymaker being sung as windows were being broken. I heard Waymaker being sung also in July on the streets of Philly.

Violence I have said in the past and I say it again today, is the way of the weak and the defeated. When you have to resort to violence or encourage violence with your words then you are weak and godless. You are not a follower of Jesus Christ. Don't conflate the two, don't fall for people who say that they are Christian and take part in acts of violence or speak in favor of violence. They are not disciples of Jesus Christ. Joseph in the power that he enjoyed showed strength by showing grace.

Paul understood this because he had suffered terrible at the hands of the people of Philippi. Let's get to Philippians and set the stage there for the grace that Paul wishes upon those around him simply because he had received grace from God. So Philippi was a city on the crossroads economically, culturally, religiously. It was the center of commerce on one of the main Roman thoroughfares. It was founded by the father of Alexander the Great and it was in prime position for growth and for the gathering of people from all over the world.

We read that Paul comes to Philippi in Acts 16 and there meets Lydia who was married to an important official of the city. Lydia and her entire family is baptized. Paul goes into the city and drives out a demon from a slave girl who had been economically profitable to her masters. Her masters stir up a crowd and in the square they beat and flog Paul and throw him into prison. That night there is an earthquake and the jail cells spring open and Paul stays put.

The jailer is so thankful that he and his entire family is baptized. The officials of the city tell Paul he can leave, he doesn't leave until they apologize to him, which they do, and then he leaves. From there this nascent church begun by Paul in Philippi grows.

This is a letter to that church community with which Paul has history and which Paul absolutely loves. Paul loves this church. This church is special to Paul. Paul writes this letter while he was in prison in Rome, probably in his last days of his life. Paul writes this letter probably with people like Lydia and the jailer all who had experienced the grace of God through the actions of Paul, which were grace filled.

Given the sinful conditions that determine our granting or withholding a blessing, or grace, for any of to desire God's unmerited favor upon other persons is certainly due to the presence in us of a God who sends sun and rain upon good and evil alike and who is kind even to the ungrateful and the selfish. Paul was able to say in his first two verses: grace and peace to you. Grace to you. The person who can say this has experienced that same grace through Jesus Christ. When was the last time that you wished grace on anyone? While joy is at the heart of this letter, you have to pass through grace in order to arrive at joy. Today, we begin with grace.

Today we make a case for grace. Now, I am fully aware that grace is able to degenerate into a sentimental "acceptance" without moral earnestness. It is hard to be filled with grace when you are filled with conspiracy theories that only thinks evil of people and doesn't reflect the grace that you have received from Jesus Christ. It is hard to give grace to others when you believe untruths more than you believe the Bible. We know that the truth will always come out in the light, and I believe on Wednesday we saw a truth that tragically many of us already knew.

As we begin our journey together through Philippians, it has to be a journey of joy, a journey to be surprised by joy as we make our way through it. But on this journey to discovering and being surprised by joy we have to pass by grace first. That is today. Reflect upon the sacrifice of Jesus in your lives and then you will be able to share grace with others. Amen.