THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 15, 2023
ISAIAH 25:1-9 | PSALM 23 | PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9 | MATTHEW 22:1-14

Last month, we received a visit from Rev. Tim Krick, who is a congregational development officer from Lutheran World Relief. He was in Ukraine and Turkey earlier this summer, and so he had lots of firsthand stories about LWR's work that he was telling us about and lots of pictures to share.

And one of the pictures was of a waiting room in a traveling medical clinic in Ukraine. And the picture looks sort of like what you would expect. Everything looks very clean and efficient, but it also looks like you could pack it up in a hurry if you needed to. But when you looked closer, you noticed something that seemed a little bit off. On the front desk, next to the sign-in sheet, there was a plate of cookies.

On the one hand, a war zone, a grain blockade, an uncertain future, a field hospital. And yet, a plate of cookies. It seems out of place.

I was reminded of that picture while reading today's selection from Philippians. This is a letter that Paul wrote while he was in prison. This was a difficult time for Paul and his ministry, which seems to be drawing to a close. So what does Paul want to tell the Philippians about? He wants to tell them about joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." It seems out of place. But once you understand it, it makes all the sense in the world.

We often use joy as a synonym for happiness. To be joyful means to have a positive feeling because of something that's happening. If you ask someone what the most joyful day of their life was, they'll probably say a day when something good happened. Wedding. Child. Graduation. Retirement. We experience joy when we find ourselves in a positive situation.

This is fine except for one small problem: situations change. In its most benign form, it might be something like this. We were sad when the alarm clock went off. But then we had a cup of coffee, and we felt joyful. We were annoyed when we got into work. But then we heard a good song on the radio, and we felt joyful. We were frustrated that the self-checkout said we didn't put the item in the bagging area when we did, but then then we ran into a friend and we felt joyful. If you don't feel joyful, just wait five minutes. And if you do feel joyful, well, enjoy the next five minutes. If this is the kind of joy Paul encourages us to exhibit, then good luck.

But this isn't what Paul is getting at, of course. Because Paul's joy doesn't depend on a situation. It depends on a relationship. Paul's big idea—if you were at Tynan's baptism last week, this was the whole homily—is that in Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, God has created a relationship with us that never ends and can't be broken. Paul trusts that God's love is stronger than distance or imprisonment or even death. And so we know that even when our lives are difficult or boring or aimless, we are still beloved. In this challenging situation, Paul is certainly unhappy. But because he knows God is present with him, he has reason to rejoice.

What Paul's getting at here isn't a feeling so much as it is a posture toward life. A belief that because God is always in relationship with me through Christ, I can exhibit the

love of Christ to my neighbors. As Teilhard de Chardin once put it, "Joy is an infallible sign of the presence of God."

This is the kind of joy that's given to all of us. At every moment, God is sustaining us and guiding us into the pattern of Christ's life. And so at every moment, we have the opportunity to love and serve our neighbors. To be the body of Christ for them, in the same way that the Philippians have been for Paul.

We all know people who exhibit this joy in their lives. One of my favorite examples of this is right at the beginning of our hymnal. We have a list of commemorations that we do as part of our liturgical calendar. This week, for example, we have commemorations for Teresa of Ávila and Ignatius. The reason we do these commemorations isn't because these people were perfect or because they had all the right answers. If it was, it would just be discouraging. *Well, I'm no Teresa of Avila*. Or *I'm no Ignatius*. We commemorate these figures to reflect on the ways that God transforms our lives. We can say, *Well, if God empowered people like Teresa and Ignatius to live their vocations and love their neighbors in their contexts, then certainly God is doing the same for me*. Instead of being depressing (*I could never do that*.), they can be a source of joy (*God has called me to this*.).

If you go down this list, you see an incredibly diverse group of people. Clergy and lay people. European, African, Asian, Latin American. Artists, activists, musicians, theologians, political leaders, nurses. But as you read about these lives, you see that they all have two things in common. One is that they often seemed a little out of place. When St. Francis turned down his inheritance so he could spend more time talking with animals, people didn't go, *Yea, that makes sense*. They thought, there's something a bit off with this picture. The second thing you'd see is a sense of joy in God's service. They were comfortable in their own skin. These people often seemed a bit out of place to the people around them because they understood they didn't need to go somewhere else or do something else or—God forbid—be someone else to love God and their neighbor.

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist—God's physical presence among us—we are given that same joy as we live and serve. It's not a coincidence that the presiding minister begins our invitation to prayer this way: "It is indeed right, our duty, and our joy that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise…" In all times and in all places, joy.

On it's face? Impossible. But in the light of Jesus's resurrection, a new possibility. "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul tells us. "Again I will say, Rejoice."

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