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“Rejoice”

Philippians 4: 1-9 (Matthew 22:1-14, Exodus 32:1-14)

by Rev. Meghan Davis

Longview Presbyterian Church

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Finally Paul’s letter arrived. After months of waiting, at last we were to hear his reply. I could tell Syntyche was anxious to hear the letter. I wasn’t particularly anxious because I knew what he would say. I knew he would come down on my side and put her in her place.

Syntyche and I have had our fair share of arguments. She’s too much of a free spirit. She thinks that “love” is going to solve everything and that we need to be loving and accepting of people regardless of who they are or how they act. I think we need to have standards. We need to have expectations of people and when they don’t measure up, we need to make sure they know it. Certainly, I don’t mind giving people a second chance to repent and reform, but how many second chances can you give someone? At some point you just have to send them on their way. Syntyche says I’m judgmental. I’m not judgmental. I’m simply... vigilant.

Here’s an example. We were discussing the parables of Jesus. Syntyche said that you can’t take the parables literally. I said, “of course not, they’re allegory.”

She said, “mmm... yes and no. There’s not a direct one-to-one correlation between everything in the parables lining up with something in our faith.” And she brought up the story of the wedding banquet. She said, “if the king is God, and the son is Jesus, who are the guests who don’t come to the banquet?”

The Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes and all the religious leaders who have ignored or even killed the prophets of God including Jesus, of course. (Sometimes Syntyche really isn’t very bright.)

“Well then, who are all the guests who end up being brought in from the streets?” she asked.

Everybody. Everybody is invited to the banquet, the good, the bad, everybody. It’s not that hard to figure out, my dear.

“But what about the man who got thrown out?”

“What about him?” I said, wondering where she thought she was going with this line of thought.

“Why was he thrown out for not having the proper clothes when he had just been rounded up off the street to come in? Was he supposed to walk around every day dressed up in clothes that would be appropriate for a wedding banquet?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe his error was that he wasn’t fully committed. Maybe it was that he came to the banquet but was just going through the motions. Maybe he was just there for the free food but didn’t really have the proper respect for the king and his son.”

“Maybe,” she said, clearly unconvinced, “it just doesn’t make sense for God to invite everyone in off the street and then get mad about someone who looks like they just came in off the street. It doesn’t seem like the loving and kind God who Jesus talked about and called ‘Father.’”

I tried to explain it to her, “Obviously God has decided who will be let into the kingdom of heaven and who will not. I know I’m in. You’re *probably* ok. But as for those who don’t believe, they don’t have a chance.”

“How do you *know* that? You *don’t* know that. No one knows except God and maybe God doesn’t even know.”

“Of course God knows! God is omnipotent.”

“But sometimes God changes his mind.”

“God doesn’t change his mind. God is all knowing and all powerful. God doesn’t ever change his mind.”

“What about in Exodus?”

“What about Exodus?” She loves to do that. She knows that she knows the scriptures better than I and she loves to wave it in my face. There’s nothing wrong with knowing the scripture, but pride is a sin and I know she has more than a touch of pride that she knows scripture better than anyone else.

“Remember in Exodus when Aaron made the golden calf?” I just looked at her. I kind of knew what she was talking about by not exactly and I didn’t want her to know it. “And they worshipped the golden calf.” It was sounding more familiar now but I still didn’t want to let on. “And God decided to wipe them all out for their idolatry and told Moses that he would kill them and then make a great nation of Moses.”

“Yes, I know the story. Then God killed them all except Moses and his family. What does this have to do with anything?”

“No, God didn’t kill them. Moses argued with God and got him to change his mind. He told God that God would look bad if he killed them. The Egyptians would say, ‘why did Yahweh drag all those people out into the desert just to kill them?’ and Moses reminded God of the promises God made to Abraham and Isaac and Israel and Moses was able to change God’s mind.”

I wasn’t convinced she knew what she was talking about but I don’t know scripture well enough to argue and all I could say was, “so?”

“So... I just don’t think that God’s going to throw anyone out of the banquet that’s all. And even if he does, no human is in a position to judge who will be in and who will be thrown out.”

Like I said, we’ve had plenty of arguments before. Everything from theology to how to set the table.

But we always got along when Paul was here. At least, we tried to get along. We pretended to get along. We made nice. But when Paul left and he didn’t specifically name a leader before leaving, that’s when the trouble really began. It’s obvious that I should be in charge. For one thing, I’m older and wiser. Those two things are always named together: older and wiser. I’m wise enough to know that they don’t necessarily go hand in hand. I’ve met countless old fools. Wise young people, too, though they are harder to come by. But in this case, I assure you, I am **both** older and much wiser than Syntyche.

Syntyche claims that she doesn't think we need a particular person in charge, everyone is invited to the banquet, everyone is equal and only God is Lord of all. She says that if we had needed a designated leader, Paul would have named one, or encouraged us to choose one. But since he didn't, he must want us to work together as a group with no specific leader. Hmph. Everyone knows that you can't get anything done if you don't have anyone in charge, making decisions, telling people what to do. I can't tell if Syntyche is really that naïve or if it's just the opposite. Maybe she's calculating and manipulative and what she's really doing is trying to get my guard down with all this "work together as equals" garbage so she can quietly work herself into a position of power.

At last, we received the letter from Paul. The letter that would tell us once and for all who was right and who was Syntyche. We gathered the whole community around to hear the letter. It was quite a long letter and we wanted everyone to hear it. The letter started. Nothing about our situation. It went on and on and I have to admit, I was having trouble focusing on what the letter was saying because I was just trying to listen for my name, to hear Paul say that I was right. He started talking about following Christ's example of humility and obedience and Syntyche looked at me and nodded with a look that said, "I told you so but I'm too nice to *say* I told you so I'm putting on this false look of loving concern." I don't know what she meant by that. I'm humble and obedient. I'm probably the most humble person in our church. Maybe in all of Philippi. As I sat there, trying to think of someone, anyone more humble than I, more obedient to God than I suddenly I heard my name, "I urge Euodia ...." Unfortunately, because I hadn't been paying attention, I missed what followed. "Wait! Read that part again," I blurted out. He repeated, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Now I was really paying attention. Here's what I was waiting for. I sat up straight, straightened my hair, knowing that all eyes would be on me. The letter continued, "help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life." It's true, we have struggled beside him... Some of us more than others but I won't name names... The letter went on, but there was no other mention of us and there was no decision on our disagreement. All Paul said was that he wanted us to be "of the same mind in the Lord." Well, that's not going to happen. Of the same mind. I guess it's possible. As soon as she agrees that I'm right...

A few days after the letter was read, Syntyche approached me. She wanted to talk about it. I didn't see what there was to talk about. Paul didn't fix our problem.

"But he told us what we need to do," Syntyche said.

"What? Be of the same mind? Rejoice? We're supposed to be rejoicing? What is there to rejoice about? The Romans are against us. The religious authorities are against us. Paul is in prison. What is there to rejoice about?"

"I know," she agreed, "Our circumstances are not perfect. Our lives are difficult. We are up against so much. But maybe... Maybe joy is deeper than simply a good feeling an individual gets out of a happy circumstance. Maybe joy is shared by the community."

“In response to...?”

“As Paul reminded us in the letter: we rejoice in response to the fact that the Lord is near.”

I knew she was right. But I wasn't ready to admit it. I didn't say anything, so she kept talking. (She does that.) “When Paul tells us to rejoice, it's more of a command than an invitation. I think he's telling us to rejoice both to encourage us and to remind us. We have a story of faith. We have experienced God's presence in our midst. We must let this story form our relationships. Our lives should radiate 'gentleness' and nonanxious prayerfulness. Our thoughts should overflow with 'whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, [and] whatever is commendable.' Because of God's nearness, we should rejoice always.”<sup>1</sup>

I thought for a moment, then said, “Rejoice, rejoice always. It sounds simple but it really is countercultural, isn't it?”

“And subversive,” she added, “it confuses those in power, it frustrates the oppressors. They don't understand how we—who by all rights should be miserable—they don't understand our rejoicing.”

“Very well,” I sighed, “If joy is communal and not individual, if joy cannot be complete unless it is shared. Let us try to be of the same mind in the Lord.”

You know, it's funny. My name, “Euodia” means “have a good way” or to “have success” or to “be led successfully.” “Syntyche” means “the meeting” or “the successful event.” So it makes sense that the two of us should “have a good way meeting.” It makes sense for us to work well together to “have success meeting.” To be of the same mind in the Lord.

Now, I'm not going to pretend it's easy. Working closely with someone, living together, people can easily grate on each other's nerves. Especially if that someone is Syntyche. And it's not easy rejoicing always, either. It's much easier to lose sight of what's important and fixate on what is not important.

I guess what Paul was trying to get us to see is that our disagreement isn't important. If he had rendered a judgment saying that one of us was right, it would have had the opposite effect from what is important. If he had told us who was right and who was wrong, it would have driven the wedge further between us. And no one would have been happy. Working together would have been even more difficult if he had taken sides. But Paul reminded us of what *is* most important: that we work together, worship together, rejoice together. Because the Lord is near. And surely that is reason to rejoice. So let us rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Y. Crainshaw, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 162.

Also consulted, Annette Weissenrieder, and Nathan Eddy, *ibid*, pp. 159-163.