

The Gospel According to Loretta Lynn

Philippians 1:3-11

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In the spring of 2002, I had applied to various divinity schools and was trying to figure out where I would start in the fall. One of the schools I applied to was Vanderbilt, and so I traveled one week to meet with professors, to sit in on a few classes, and to try to determine whether or not it would be a good fit for me. The visit went well, even if I eventually didn't matriculate there.

Besides being my first visit to Vanderbilt, this was also my first visit to Nashville, so I took some time one day and went to explore the city. Even though it was 1:00 on a nondescript Thursday afternoon, the downtown area was hopping. Live music had already started in most of the bars, and I enjoyed walking along Broadway looking at cowboy boot stores and souvenir shops while I listened to country music spilling out into the street. At one point, I walked past a telephone pole that had a flier on it advertising that the First Lady of Country Music, Loretta Lynn herself, would be holding a book signing at the Country Music Hall of Fame...that very afternoon.

While not a huge country music fan myself, this was a big deal to me. The basement of our house is decorated almost exclusively with signed vinyl. When Jennifer and I have gone to a concert, we've often been lucky enough to get a record signed. We really like getting *records* signed—they're a great size, they look nice in a frame, they're generally colorful and artfully done. The chance to add Loretta Lynn to the collection was exciting.

Being 2002, this was before the vinyl resurgence of the past decade or so, and second-hand record shops were the only options for finding albums. Fortunately, being in downtown Nashville, the only businesses that were as plentiful as bars, cowboy boot stores, and souvenir shops were used record shops. I located a music store with relative ease, found a couple of Loretta Lynn albums in good condition, and made my way to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

When I arrived, there were numerous signs up all over the lobby and the gift shop saying that Ms. Lynn would **only** be signing merchandise purchased at the Country Music Hall of Fame gift shop. I looked around for a while, but—as suspected—they didn't carry any vinyl. Unsure of what to do, I ended up buying one of her books, but I clung to the hope that I'd be able to get the album signed. Books are a lot harder to hang on a wall.

The signing started at 5:00, and I had a couple of hours to kill, but a line was already forming in the lobby, and I didn't want to miss out on my chance to meet Loretta Lynn. I went ahead and got in line, maybe 35 or 40 people ahead of me. Soon after, two women got in line behind me. They were...not happy people. They started by complaining that the Country Music Hall of Fame should provide seating for people while they have to wait for so long, then eventually walked over to the café in the lobby and loudly dragged two chairs across the floor to sit in while they waited. They then proceeded to gripe about other aspects of the process, including the fact that the Hall of Fame was only allowing signatures on their merchandise.

At this point, one of them said that her sister had recently attended a signing at a bookstore across town with the same policy and that it had worked this way: when you got to the front, you handed your book or CD to the store worker who then placed it in front of Loretta. Loretta signed it and handed it back to you. But the woman's sister had done this while also thrusting

another item in front of Loretta herself, circumventing the worker and getting both the store-bought and the home-brought items signed. The woman showed her friend the Loretta Lynn record that *she'd* brought from home, hoping to achieve the same success.

I thought this sounded like a great plan. I just didn't know if it was going to work. There were so *many signs* that the Hall of Fame had put up discouraging this very practice, and the overall effect of these signs was kind of...unfriendly.

So, being both savvy and kindhearted, I turned to the women behind me, who had returned to griping about the wait time and the lack of waiting room accommodations. "Excuse me," I said, "I don't really have anywhere to be, and the wait is going to be harder on you than it will be on me. Would you two like to go in front of me?" They jumped at that chance, and I now had the opportunity to see how well their contraband ploy worked before trying it myself.

As a result, I ended up behind these women and in front of a young boy, maybe 13 or 14, waiting with his single mother who looked like she was around 30. The mother had pulled her son out of school on this Thursday and driven two and a half hours from Paducah, Kentucky so that he could meet his idol, Loretta Lynn. He was bursting with excitement, nervous but chattering, wondering what she would be like. His fandom was surprising...I would have expected this level of excitement for a teenager meeting someone like LeBron James or Taylor Swift, not Loretta Lynn. But the boy was ecstatic.

So I found myself waiting for the signing to start, the line not moving for another hour, between two older women who seemed mostly glad to have procured seats and a mother and son brimming with excitement.

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Today we start a new sermon series based on the book of Philippians. It's one of Paul's most fascinating and personal letters. The church in Philippi meant a lot to Paul—he had helped found it, and it seemed to be one of his favorite Christian communities.

Throughout most of the New Testament, Paul is something of a grumpy, even arrogant man. He comes off as having more in common with the two women in front of me in line rather than with the boy and his mother behind me. He is often trying to resolve theological issues or power struggles, and the resulting tone can be abrasive for many readers today.

We believe that Philippians was written near the end of Paul's life, and we are near certain that he wrote it in prison while charged with a capital offense. As a result, when he writes Philippians, we expect him to be at his grumpiest...but he is not. Gentle rather than abrasive, he is unconcerned with theology or power, unconcerned with law and rectitude. Instead, he is abundantly joyful. The word "joy" and its derivatives show up 16 times in the four chapters of Philippians. Paul, like the teenage boy, cannot contain his joy...even as he is in prison, even as he is about to be executed, even though he is undoubtedly lonely and perhaps afraid.

He is likely unhappy...but he remains joyful.

It is clear, particularly in today's scripture, that Paul's joy is sourced from two different places. First, he asserts that he is joyful—as well as thankful—because of what God is doing. In many ways, this opening to the letter reads like a traditional thank you note, except that Paul is addressing the Philippians and thanking God for them instead of thanking them directly.

Through this, Paul is offering us some insight into his sense of purpose, his calling. Ever since his Damascus Road experience, he has understood his place in the world as one who loves, promotes, defends, and follows Jesus. Sometimes the clarity with which he pursues that identity is aggravating, but it also allows him to be joyful even when he is imprisoned, alone, or afraid.

When we are able to articulate our sense of purpose and our relationship with God with such adamant clarity, it allows us access to a vein of joy that runs through all other emotions and experiences, the happy and the sad, the crowded and the solitary, the settled and the shaken. Our joy is in our God, and our God knows no limits, and therefore neither does our joy.

The second place that Paul finds joy is in the Philippians themselves. Many of the recipients of Paul's various letters will hear him being irritated, argumentative, or even manipulative...but the church at Philippi has bestowed upon Paul its own joy, and he receives and returns it to them.

It is, again, an overwhelming joy. One of the most critical lines in the scripture we read today comes in verse 7, where Paul writes, "It is right for me to think this way about *all of you*, because you hold me in your heart, for *all of you* share in God's grace with me." Paul will continue the "all of you" language in verse 8 and throughout the letter, emphasizing that he does not hold back or parcel out his gratitude and joy, does not reserve it only for the leaders or for his favorites in Philippi, but rather lets it stream abundantly to everyone because it is a joy that cannot be contained.

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I almost scrapped this sermon this week. It's difficult (and perhaps insensitive or gauche) to preach on the subject of joy when our city has had the week that we've had. We remain keenly aware of what our neighbors in Hedingham are wrestling with right now—the fear, anger, shock, sadness, confusion, and grief that are dominating their world.

Embracing joy is different from ignoring grief. Joy is something that uplifts us beyond the mountaintop when we are celebrating and yet also buoys us when we are drowning. In Philippians, Paul is genuinely and truly joyful for God and for the Philippians despite the fact that he is imprisoned with death on his mind, grieving his loss of freedom and potential loss of life.

Recently, it has become popular to refer to a funeral as a "celebration of life." We do this for many reasons, but one of them is that when we think upon those we love, upon those who have lived lives we cherish and admire, we do feel a real and authentic joy...even though we are also saddened, even though we miss them. I've sat through a number of memorial services and experienced both joy and sorrow.

If Paul was able to compose a message of such joy from a prison cell, it seems right for us to consider it today.

The juxtaposition inherent in Paul's message of joy reveals one other critical truth about the elated quality: Paul chooses it. He could just as easily choose to be frustrated or angry, to wonder why God is letting him sit in prison, or to focus on the problems of the Philippian church (they *must* have problems; they're a church). He does not choose these things. He chooses joy.

To be clear: I am *not* saying “chin up—the faithful aren’t allowed to be unhappy.” Rather, I’m saying that if our focus is pure and our relationships are sound, we have the ability to tap into a joy that is deep and beautiful, that carries through storm and desert, that uplifts and assuages and transforms. This is what I saw in the boy and his mother behind me in line on a Thursday afternoon in 2002 and what I failed to see in the women in front of me that day.

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Which brings me back to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Finally, it’s 5:00. The Hall of Fame workers lead the front of our line through the gift shop, winding it around the back walls and amid all the merchandise that they hope we’ll decide to buy while we wait in the store. The signing desk is up front, and the line snakes through the store a good bit. At this point, I’m right at the entrance to the store, with 40 or so people still in front of me.

Some other Hall of Fame employees come to the line and wordlessly, brusquely, part us right there at the entrance to the store, creating a gap between me and the boy and his mother. At this point, they usher in the woman of the hour, the most famous Coal Miner’s Daughter, Ms. Loretta Lynn, right through that gap and into the store, leading her over to the signing desk.

The boy is speechless. He wasn’t ready to see her just yet...she kind of appeared out of nowhere, passing within inches of him, and he just wasn’t prepared to be this close to his idol, not yet. He can’t say a thing—jaw dropped, eyes wide, body shaking, totally speechless.

His mother, in a brilliant moment of parenting, realizes that her son is stunned. She is also pretty unnerved, but she manages to get out one clear and pleading “Loretta!!” Loretta turns around and sizes up the situation immediately. She brushes away the Country Music Hall of Fame workers, who are anxious to get her behind the signing table and very concerned with keeping to the established protocol. Loretta walks back to the boy and gives him a huge hug, squeezing him tight in her arms. He is still speechless. She tells him how excited she is to see him, and she really seems to mean it. She smiles broadly and warmly. The boy still cannot say a word. She tells him that she’ll see him up front in just a few minutes, and this time he manages a tentative nod (even though he still can’t speak).

Loretta makes her way up front, and the gap in the line fills back in. If I’d thought the boy was excited before, it’s nothing like what he’s experiencing now. For the next hour, as we move through the store, all he can say is “She touched me! She actually touched me!” and “I’m never gonna wash this arm again.”

And, of course, an hour later, much to the consternation of the Country Music Hall of Fame employees, Loretta warmly and cheerfully signs my album.

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I’ve thought a lot about that moment, that boy, in the nearly two weeks since Loretta Lynn passed away. His life was very different from mine. Based on my interaction with him, my guess is that he probably was not afforded many of the opportunities that I have been given, many that I took and take for granted. But, man, was he joyful.

His joy was different from happiness, although he was certainly also happy. His joy coexisted with nervousness and apprehension, with disappointment and hardship, with impatience and uncertainty. His joy emanated from a deeper place.

On that day twenty years ago in Nashville, there was a lot of disgruntlement in the Country Music Hall of Fame. The signage was unaccommodating and unfriendly. The women in front of me were grumbling, dissatisfied, and distracted. The employees were subjugated to protocol, impatient, and in some cases perhaps given just enough power to be dangerous. But the boy saw none of this. He saw Loretta. And Loretta, God bless her, saw the boy.

Their hug embodied and exploded joy throughout the entire space.

If I were to guess what the boy wanted to say to Loretta, it would be this: "I thank my God every time I remember you."

We who attempt to walk the path of Christ are called to be joyful. We will only get there if we can find joy—create joy, embrace joy, spread joy, choose joy,—*with* each other.