

Being Alive
Philippians 1:12-26
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Last week we started a new series that will take us through the book of Philippians, Paul's own ode to joy. Because Paul is so overwhelmingly and consistently joyful throughout this book, it would be possible—even tempting—to assert that the theme of the letter is “joy” and then stop there. It would be possible—even tempting—to preach pretty much the same sermon for several weeks in a row. Have I told you the story about the time I met Loretta Lynn?

Stopping at “joy is good” or even “joy is important,” however, might also suggest that “joy is easy,” and nothing could be further from the truth. We've spent the past several years as a society proving that joy isn't exactly easy, wading through the quagmire of Covid, immersed in a sharply divided and precarious political system, living through cultural and ethnic tensions, and watching a war on the other side of the world that leaves everyone unsettled. Joy may be straightforward, but it is not easy.

More pointedly: last week, I said that one of the facets of Paul's joy in prison is that he chooses to be joyful...and while it sounds simple just to “choose joy,” it is far more difficult that just flicking a switch or checking a box.

The question that remains throughout Philippians is “*how* does Paul choose joy, particularly given his circumstances?” This is what we really want to know...or, perhaps more pointedly, we want to know how *we* can choose joy, given our circumstances.

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American composer Stephen Sondheim's greatest song, arguably, comes from the 1970 musical *Company*. I saw *Company* when I was in college, and I have to admit that I wasn't crazy about it. Part of it, I think, is that it's a bit of a tricky play to pull off, and the performance I saw maybe could've used some different talent in its cast and crew...but a bigger part, I think, was that I probably simply wasn't old enough to appreciate most of the heart, the essence, of this particular play.

The play is about a man, Bobby, who is single but whose friends are all coupled off. Centered around Bobby's 35th birthday, the play asks midlife questions about contentment and restlessness, about community and isolation, and about, well, joy. Throughout all of his relationships and his musing, Bobby is trying to figure out what it will take for him to know joy.

The play concludes with Sondheim's aforementioned Arguably Greatest Song, “Being Alive.” “Being Alive” was the fourth choice for the musical's finale; Sondheim kept writing songs, trying them in that spot, and deciding that they just didn't quite work for one reason or another. For instance, the third choice, a song ironically called “Happily Ever After,” was deemed too dark to conclude a play about someone seeking joy.

That was okay, because it led to “Being Alive,” and “Being Alive” is brilliant. It begins similarly to the dour “Happily Ever After” by having Bobby list the things about sharing one's life with someone else that are aggravating and exhausting: “someone to hold you too close, someone

to hurt you too deep, someone to sit in your chair and ruin your sleep.” Continuing, he gripes that getting that close to someone means “someone you have to let in, someone whose feelings you spare, someone who (like it or not) will want you to share, a little, a lot.”¹ Essentially, Bobby looks at the idea of coupling with someone—looks at his friends who are coupled—and says, “Who needs it?”

Then there’s a key change, and there’s a change in Bobby as well. He realizes that he’s been singing about how these things are worthless...and yet he’s been noticing them in his friends, coveting them, even craving them. Transformed, he sings the same lines again with just a slight change, now pleading “somebody hold *me* too close, somebody hurt *me* too deep, somebody sit in *my* chair and ruin *my* sleep, and make *me* aware, of Being Alive.”

Bobby breaks through his moment of crisis...and Sondheim says that the song evolved from complaint to prayer.² Instead of thinking in the abstract, Bobby now thinks personally. He moves from being unaware to self-aware, from cynical to hopeful. A shift in perspective moved the song—the character, the musical itself—from a dismal expression of frustration to a sincere yearning for joy...even though the words themselves barely change at all.

In “Being Alive,” and in Philippians, part of the key to how joy is pursued lies in the perspective.

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Today’s scripture reading begins with Paul offering a report of his circumstances. As we know, they are less than rosy...he is in prison, his critical missionary work on hold while he sits in shackles, dependent on gifts from the church at Philippi and perhaps elsewhere. We might expect Paul to look out of his prison cell at the world beyond and to wonder “what if,” to bemoan the fact that he is confined to quarters and unable to teach, to preach, to establish, to theologize, to commit his life to this new understanding of faith and to propagate that faith to the masses. That is what he feels put on this Earth to do; that is where he finds incredible joy...and he is instead locked up and unable to travel, to found churches, and to do the thing that gives him purpose.

There are a lot of gloomy Old Testament prophets and kings who find themselves in similar situations and lament their very existence as a result.

But Paul starts his report by letting the Philippians know that his perspective has shifted. Instead of looking out of his prison cell and wanting what cannot be, he looks within the cell and recognizes the opportunity that lies therein. He tells the church at Philippi that the dream he has dreamed continues—not in the way he imagined, but in a way that is nonetheless real and beautiful and powerful. He is finding a way to teach and preach and theologize...and, as a result, is still finding a way to embrace joy.

The next few verses demonstrate the same unexpected perspective: he admits that some “proclaim Christ” out of love and that others do the same thing out of selfishness. It feels like—based on the Paul we know—he’s about to praise those who act out of love and to admonish those who act out of selfishness. This is the same Paul who wrote,

¹ Sondheim, Stephen. “Being Alive.” 1970. *Company*. <https://genius.com/8302852>

² Sondheim, Stephen (2009). *Finishing the hat: Collected lyrics (1954-1981) with attendant comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. New York, NY: Knopf, 196. ISBN 978-0679439073. Qtd. on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Being_Alive.

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”³

And yet here, when describing those who preach the gospel selfishly, without love, he writes, “And so what? What really matters is that Christ is preached in every way.”

That seems like a *totally different* perspective.

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Because Paul’s stance here is so drastically unexpected, it’s worth a little detour to try to make sense of it. We would normally expect love to conquer all, for authenticity to matter...and yet here, Paul describes love and the gospel in a way that confuses us.

The truth is, when it comes to why we do the things we do, very few of them are purely selfless or selfish. A postmodern understanding of self, love, decision, and action would require acknowledgement of the fact that we’re always biased and subjective in the world we live in.⁴ This is true when we think about our own selves, but it is particularly true when we think about what others might do. It is nearly impossible for us to know when someone else is acting from love or from greed, because usually the right answer is “both.”

Because Paul displays this understanding, he is more gracious. It’s not so much that his words have changed but rather that his demeanor has veered toward grace. As a result, he has moved from “love is everything” to “love and grace are everything.” It is not quite the *totally different* perspective that initially strikes us, even if it is unexpected.

Paul, in his old age, seems to have mellowed some, recognizing that he can’t know exactly what someone else’s motivation is. He also seems to be recognizing that God will make the good happen whether he is involved or not, and that God can use someone’s preaching to establish good whether that person is properly motivated or not.⁵ As a result, Paul is able to find joy in knowing that God will make the good happen instead of worrying about others’ motivation and its authenticity.

Shortly after graduating college, I taught high school alongside two men, one who was probably in his 30s and one who was approaching retirement. The older man was never aggravated by anything. Students would act up, would be disrespectful to him, would fail to turn things in, and would skip class altogether. At one point, I asked the younger teacher how the older man put up with it, and the younger teacher said this: “When you get older, you will either be crabby or happy. I know already that I’m going to be crabby. But that guy...he’s just happy. Nothing will ruffle his feathers.”

Paul—despite the fact that he has seemed (previous to this letter) to be on the path toward crabbiness—appears to have ended up in the happy camp. He has found the perspective that will allow him to be joyful.

³ 1st Corinthians 13:1-3 (NIV)

⁴ Bockmuehl, Markus. (1998). *The Epistle to the Philippians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 80.

⁵ Ibid 81.

Just as in “Being Alive,” it’s a slight shift in perspective, not a total transformation. The character Bobby doesn’t have far to go to reach the realm of joy; he just needs a little nudge to make things more personal, to understand human relationships humanely. Paul is the same: he only needs a tiny movement, a little swing, from preaching the value of love to preaching the value of love *and* grace. It’s a carefully maneuvered change in perspective that leads to joy.

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The perspective is little—nuanced, gentle, even easy to overlook. The other thing going on in both Paul’s letter and in “Being Alive” is much more grandiose, much larger.

Commentaries will sometimes divide today’s reading into two sections, the first being verses 12 through 18a and the second being verses 18b through 26. This second section is often labeled something like “Christian Confidence.”⁶ These verses are marked by Paul talking about “speaking with boldness” and “boasting in Jesus.” There is a distinct sense of courage and confidence in these verses.

Again, this might not be what we expect for a man on death row...but Paul seems confident that regardless of what happens to him, the good news he has devoted his adulthood to will thrive. He is confident not in himself but in his mission. He is bold not for his own glory but for God’s. Boldness, in other words, is taking a risk.

It’s not surprising that I, as a member of GenX, was a latchkey kid starting around third grade. When I was just a little older, I would frequently hop on my bike and pedal around the neighborhood. I don’t think my parents knew where I was most of the time—usually I was playing basketball at a friend’s house or building a fort in the woods nearby. Occasionally I was somewhere I shouldn’t have been, but most of the time, I was behaving. I was just living a free-range life.

That is not how we live now. Parents have become needier about knowing where their kids are, who they’re with, what they’re doing. We have all become, culturally, much more concerned with protection and safety. We no longer attempt to take risks wisely; we attempt to eliminate risks altogether.

Paul has taken many, many risks...and—it’s important to note—he has landed in jail. But because he has taken these risks, because he still encourages others to take them boldly, boastfully, he possesses something that carries him through prison, doubt, fear, and loneliness. Because he takes risks, Paul encounters joy.

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If, after hearing this sermon, you decide you need to go out and listen to “Being Alive,” there are two versions that I would commend to you. The first is Bernadette Peters’, in part because it’s hard to go wrong listening to Bernadette Peters sing pretty much anything but in part because she absolutely doesn’t hold anything back when she does this number.⁷ The top commenter on her YouTube video says that she performs this song “like it’s the last time she might sing it.”⁸ That’s exactly how one should sing a song about pursuing joy: with all that she has.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJssHQjaZHg>

⁸ Ibid.

There is an inherent risk whenever we put our all into something. It leaves us no outs, no safety nets. Obviously, we have to pick our spots carefully when it comes to putting our all into something—we don't put our all into everything or it will backfire horribly. But, if we want to pursue joy, we have to put our all into something, into certain carefully chosen things. This is how Bernadette sings; this is what Paul models. It is a critical part of how we find joy...the willingness to take a risk, to give with all that we have.

The second version of "Being Alive" that I would recommend is performed by Adam Driver in the 2019 film *Marriage Story*.⁹ Unlike Peters, Driver sings both halves of the song, both the "you" and the "me" sections...and as a result, he has a chance to really sink his teeth into the transformation from one who sees only the negative aspects of coupling to one who grasps and yearns for the more positive aspects.

The amazing thing is that Driver's character Charlie sings this song as his own divorce—which is the subject of most of the movie—is becoming finalized. He is able to grasp—to articulate, even to sing—the joy of marriage even as his own marriage is dissolving. He isn't exactly happy—the song ends with him letting out a long cathartic sigh of recognition; he's forlornly processing his current life circumstances—but he can still sing.

Like Charlie, we are not promised that things will always play out the way we expect when we take the big risk with all that we have. Like Paul, sometimes we take the risk and end up in prison, on death row. But even when those things happen...when we take the risk and pursue joy with all that we have, with our eyes and hearts finely tuned and providing just the right perspective...that is when we find joy (and when joy finds us). That is how we know that we are truly being alive.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW8laLXvOgk>