



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
the **heart** of hollywood

MAKE MY JOY COMPLETE

Sunday, September 14, 2008

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Philippians 2: 1-13

Recently one of my dearest friends called me and asked me to send her a copy of my wedding sermon. She went to seminary but didn't enter the ministry; but she's going to officiate at her niece's wedding later this month, and wanted to see what I typically say. As I retyped it to send to her, there's a part that caught my attention in a new way.

Love is not simply a feeling; it is a choice, an action, a commitment. Many people today live only according to the chemistry of their feelings. They don't ask: what's the right thing to do; they only ask -- does it feel good?

I share that with you because it seems that in light of all that has happened this past week, we need to think of joy in much the same way. Joy isn't simply a feeling; it is a choice, an action, a commitment.

It's important for us to redefine our understanding of joy in that way, because for many of us today our hearts are heavy and we don't FEEL very joyful.

- we think of the tragedy of Friday's metrolink accident
- we consider the devastation left in the wake of hurricane IKE
- we are grieving the passing of Richard Jackman

When Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians – from jail – he probably wasn't FEELING the joy, either. But the absence of emotion didn't prevent him from doing the work of Jesus Christ.

Paul was writing to settle some sort of minor dispute among the church members there in Philippi. This was the first church begun in Europe; and Paul had previously been in jail there. Philippi was a fairly wealthy Roman colony in Macedonia, so we might imagine that the controversy centered on a big idea – such as which Roman customs could be maintained and still be considered Christian, or how much power the women leaders (such as Lydia) in the church were allowed to have. Then again, it might have had nothing to do with a big idea, but a small one: such as the color of paint for the social hall. Whichever it was, Paul was writing to beloved friends to remind them of how much he appreciated their efforts to spread the Gospel – and to gently settle their dispute by asking them to choose joy.

The second chapter of Philippians is one of the best known and most beloved. Generally the focus is on verses 5-11, or what is called the kenosis, or emptying hymn. But today let's concentrate on how Paul defines joy in verses 1-4. Structurally, for those of you who remember your literary criticism, there are 4 "ifs" and 1 "then"

Paul says:

*If you find encouragement in Christ,
If you are comforted by God's love,
If you believe the spirit dwells among you,
If you have compassion and sympathy for each other and the world,
Then: here's what you do. make my joy complete:
How?
Focus on the same love, have one mind.
Don't worry about your personal agendas,
Be humble, and think of others as better than yourselves.
Don't put yourself first, but put the needs of others ahead of your own.*

This is what brought Paul joy: when the church, the beloved community, and all its members, had the same mind as Jesus Christ.

For Paul, joy doesn't come from professional success or personal gain. Joy is not me first, or even country first. Joy comes from putting Christ first. That means, then, that joy isn't necessarily the equivalent of happiness. Joy is something you decide you want – and you work for it; and the way you receive it is to empty yourself, to fill yourself with Christ's love and live your life as he did – caring for others and loving each other unconditionally. And the joy, the deep, indwelling peace and fulfillment that comes from that commitment is nearly unspeakable.

Paul knew that choosing joy means deciding if a perceived problem gets us closer to understanding the mind of Christ, gets us closer to loving each other – or is just a distraction from doing so. That doesn't mean that conflicts and disputes would go away entirely. The church at Philippi – just like our church – are human institutions. Sometimes we don't always agree. But if we choose joy, if we choose to focus on love and the needs of others, then whatever issues or concerns we have would not necessarily go away, but be put in perspective.

I want to offer some examples from our community of the self-emptying love, the kenosis that Paul says flows naturally from choosing joy.

Last night Jay Sowell emailed Rev. Dave and me about yesterday's Habitat for Humanity Housebuild where 15 of our folks went to Carson to build a house. This is actually a picture from the July housebuild – they didn't take any pictures yesterday. My son James had told me what a great day it was, and Jay filled in some of the blanks. Their stories matched, which is always a good thing ☺ For some folks this was their first housebuild, for some it was their second or third. If you went yesterday, please stand. Shake these callused hands after worship!

But the last line of Jay's email struck me:

don't you just love this congregation?

My response:

more than I can put into words.

And that's where joy comes from. When the love that we have for each other and for this world extends beyond our ability to articulate, then we are truly filled with joy.

Let me give you a few more examples of people in our congregation who make our collective joy complete, as they are present-day examples of what it means to put on the mind of Jesus Christ.

First, Colin Martin – or as he is more commonly known to us, Jordan's daddy. Colin gave me permission to share this: Friday's metrolink crash occurred on the campus of the private school where he is the associate headmaster. Their campus is 16 acres on a hill, and the train tracks run through it. Colin heard the impact and was one of the first to respond even before the emergency response teams got there. For the remainder of Friday and into the night yesterday, Colin was coordinating logistics as the school became ground zero for emergency personnel – and as a makeshift morgue. Colin called me last night on his way home to ask only that we keep in prayer the families of those who died in the crash, as well as those who were injured. I would also ask that we keep Colin and his staff in our prayers, as their actions of healing and comfort and basic logistics are a ministry unto themselves. Amen?

Early in the week I received an email from Nancy Ramos.

At this point I feel it is incumbent to say that just because you send me an email does not mean you will necessarily end up in the sermon!

Nancy preached for us last World AIDS Day and will do so again this year – only this time she'll be joined in the pulpit by her 16 year old son Raymond. Nancy was writing to tell me how much she appreciates our ongoing AIDS ministry at the 5P21 HIV/AIDS clinic at LAC-USC Hospital, where we provide lunches on the 3rd Friday of every month to the patients there. We've been doing this for over 20 years, as folks who come to the clinic don't have insurance and many wait all day to receive services. We now have the opportunity to take lunches to the children's clinic across the street, where children who are living with HIV/AIDS wait all day to receive services and many times don't get lunch. Nancy wants us to be able to feed the children as well as the adults, which we have the financial resources to do. Trouble is, for the past few months there's only been a handful of people to make the sandwiches and put the lunches together – and the only ones who have been able to deliver and serve at the hospital have been Ric and Linda Loya, and Nancy. So we haven't been able to go over to the children's clinic because we haven't had enough people to serve at the adult clinic.

In her email, Nancy wrote:

I know how important this service that United Hollywood Methodist Church is able to provide. But it's not just about "doing the time" at the clinic. Are we not supposed to have a heart for what we do in this ministry? Isn't this opportunity to serve those less fortunate, important? And feeding the kids, that's right from Scripture too, so what's happened on the 3rd Friday of the month? It's a 3 hour max time commitment and we are blessing others while in turn being blessed ourselves.

Nancy concludes:

It is not right for the patients to NOT have a few moments of OUR time, just for themselves, because we are spreading ourselves too thin, trying to be here, there, and every other place. I realize that we, myself included, cannot be at the clinic every 3rd Friday of the month even though Ric is. But we can do better.

Amen?

Today at the welcome booth there is a schedule for the next 4 "3rd Fridays" – Ric and Nancy will be out there taking signups. If you can help this coming Friday, or one of the others this year, please see him. And for the leaders of our AIDS ministry, and the joy it brings to those who are in need of bread and hope, let all God's people say Amen.

At 1 pm we will be celebrating the life of Richard Jackman.

His stool is right up there with the choir. I am so going to miss his humor and his wit. Let me share a story I have told before. Our Thursday night dinners—when we started them, I was the cook for several years. A couple of years ago we had a homeless gentleman get sick on a Thursday night, and we had to call the paramedics to take him to the hospital. Well, wouldn't you know that just about the time the paramedics were outside Grant Hall, Richard Jackman comes walking up the breezeway to dinner. He looks at me, at the man on the stretcher, and then looks at me again – and says, very matter-of-factly, "well, Kathy, I can see you've been cooking again." And then kept right on walking into Grant Hall.

I adored Richard. And I probably didn't tell him enough. After Max's accident last year, we all became a bit more intentional about letting folks know how much we care for and appreciate them. But a year later, we've probably gotten a bit slack about it. Or other things have come up, like the distractions the church at Philippi faced. Our challenge this day is to determine what it is that makes our own joy complete; that allows us to measure joy not solely by our emotions, but by the satisfaction and the fulfillment putting on the mind of Christ offers.

And as we put on the mind of Christ, loving God and our neighbors, we in turn, through our example and our witness, teach our children the better way of living on this earth. I am thankful for Evelyn Lucile, the joy she brings her parents and extended family, and the privilege of helping raise her in this the beloved community of faith.

And one day, perhaps, many MANY years from now -- she will stand in this sanctuary, surrounded by the church here in Hollywood, and hear these words:

*Love is not simply a feeling; it is a choice, an action, a commitment.
God bless you on your wedding day.*

Until then, let's work together to bring forth joy in Evelyn's life... and make God's joy complete.

Amen.

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