

“SNAPSHOTS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH”

Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

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When I lived in Duluth, there was a chaplain to the hospital oncology unit named Sister Joan O’Shea. She was one of those ageless women; she could have been anywhere between 35 and sixty, with hair that had been completely white since her 20s, an open face, and wonderful deep blue eyes. Sister Joan was an extraordinary woman with a rare gift of what I can only call spiritual presence. In any interaction with her, you could feel her grounding in a deep peace, but not a quiet peace. Joan was vibrant, engaged, the most joyful and life-affirming person I have ever known. People wanted to be near her. Men of all ages fell in love with her—which was sort of embarrassing to her. I watched her work with cancer patients and their families, and her ability to touch and heal moved me. I was just a beginning minister in those days and could not have had a better model, mentor, and friend. She chose to work in an area of medicine where there were more losses than victories; she dealt daily with pain, grief, disability, and death. And yet she was radiant, the most fully alive person I have ever met. And if, when I met her, my life course had not already been set, I would have looked seriously into following her life path, because I wanted to be like her; I wanted the spiritual grace she wore so effortlessly; I wanted my life to be grounded as hers was so I could be a Christian like she was.

There was a time, we are told, when the rank and file, the whole body of the church was like Joan, or at least that’s what I imagine they were like when I read of them. Listen to these words from this morning’s scripture reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

It’s so easy to gloss past these words rather than taking them to heart. Oh yes, these are the “churchy” words we say in this place; we’ve heard them a thousand times, and in running past them all these times, we have—for most of us, most of the time— we have emptied them of their power, of their meaning. But the best of biblical scholarship today would tell us that these words are far from empty; they are, in fact, more descriptive than prescriptive. This text is a verbal snapshot of what life was really like day to day in the early Christian community. People, ordinary people from all segments of society, because of their faith in the Risen Christ, led lives first of all characterized by a deep and unshakeable joy. Paul is one of them. When he writes this letter, he is in fact imprisoned, probably in Ephesus, for preaching the Gospel. The community he loves—the church at Philippi was a church he founded and remained close to—is experiencing dissension in its midst. And its members are certainly faced with the possibility of persecution and death from the outside. So what is the first thing Paul says to his friends: “Rejoice in the Lord.”

“Rejoice in the Lord.” There are three letters that exist written by low level Roman bureaucrats to higher level Roman bureaucrats that describe the Roman officials’ bewilderment at these people called Christians. “No matter what we do to them,” the letters say, “these people are joyful. We throw them in jail, and they embrace one another, and sing songs, and pray. We lead them out to be torn apart by wild beasts, and they speak gently to us, tell us that all will be well, and they sing some more and praise their God.” You can almost see the Romans shaking their heads in disbelief. But that’s what they were like, these early Christians. They were joyful, and gentle, and filled with an inner peace that made them courageous and compassionate in the face of whatever life threw in their path.

So what do we make of them? There is a choice for us here. We can say that these were bibleland people, that they were special or different from us, that faith was easier for them, or these Gospel accounts are inflated and unrealistic, and Paul’s words to them are just nice words. Can’t you feel the power draining out right there. Just nice “churchy” words. We can make the early Christians not like us and, in so doing, distance ourselves from their witness, from their extraordinary grace and power. Or we can take these early church people as our model, set them as our standard of what we want to become as the people of God, as a community of faith. We can appropriate for ourselves their legacy, and claim for our time and place that we will be joyful, that we will be gentle, that we will seek the inward peace of Christ with all our hearts so that we might live as openly and courageously as they did.

I think that most of us know what it’s like to make the first choice. We are all too familiar with the terrain of what liberal church commentator Martin Marty calls “tepid Christianity.” “Tepid Christianity” is what most of us practice most days in the liberal church. It is the path of minimal engagement with our faith, Christian life scaled down to where it is only marginally empowering but also only marginally threatening.

What if we were to make the second choice instead. What if we were to say in this church that we will take the small embers of faith in our hearts, and blow gently and joyfully upon them, and see what flame bursts into being. I read the accounts of the early church, I hear of the inward joy and peace of the early Christians, how their lives were so transformed, and I want it. I want it for myself, and for all of you, and for this community of all of us together. What a sight that would be—can you imagine it?—if all of us were as spiritually alive as those early Christians were. What a force to be reckoned with—all of us here having traded in the fears and anxieties that drive us for whatever is good, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, pleasing, commendable, or worthy of praise. Who knows what we could accomplish together.

Of course, there is no manual that tells us, step by step, how to get there from here. I confess that I don’t know how we grow or find a faith like that. But I do know some things. I know that we’re never going to find it unless we decide we want it, we’re not going to find it unless we believe it’s possible to be that kind of Christian, and commit ourselves to looking for a way. We’re not going to find it unless we say to ourselves, these early church folks who were so joyful, and so gentle and compassionate and deeply peaceful, they belong to us and we to them. This is what the church should be. And we will set the bar no lower.

The early Christians, they were spiritual giants. But I think the time is here for us to try to live as large as they. I look at the world around us—the poverty and despair, the violence and hatred, the environmental callousness—all the ways we humans have torn and injured God’s creation. And I think to myself, “This is a time for spiritual giants. Nothing else will get us through.” So my friends, I challenge you, I challenge all of us together, to find the path of the spirit that will lead us to joy: a joy that overflows in compassion and gentleness, a joy that is grounded in the inner peace that brings an endless well of courage and commitment. “Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say rejoice.” Thanks be to God. Amen.