

## Joy Which Surpasses All Human Understanding

Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

Sermon Text: Philippians 4:4-7



*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Gretchen recently celebrated her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday. She celebrated late into the night with her children and grandchildren. They all admire her for being so cheerful and never complaining after so many years and despite various illnesses. “How do you do it, Grandma? How can you be so cheerful?” one grandchild wanted to know. “Oh,” she said. “I simply decided not to complain to people all the time because if you complain all the time, you become lonely!” I really admire this grandmother. Nevertheless, I wonder if this is possible? Can you just decide not to complain like that? And even more, can you simply decide to be happy? In Paul’s case, it appears to be so at first glance. He calls out from jail: “Rejoice!” Only at first glance does it appear that Paul simply decided to be happy. At second glance, we notice that you can’t simply conjure up joy. Joy needs a reason. Without this reason, joy can be feigned or pretended. That’s terrible! What reason can joy have then? If you ask most people, you often hear – Joy must come from within, not just pretended or glued on, but from the whole heart. The warm feeling in your heart when something good happens. Yes, we all know that in one way or another. When we observe children at the Christmas tree, joy is real. You can almost touch it with your hands and that’s why it has such a contagious effect on adults. When two people get along well then the deepest joy is possible. This joy is real and apparent. We can now list all the things that bring us joy and that we all know in one way or another from our memories or are experiencing right now. Maybe some people also say that the best way to truly experience joy is to simply figure out what brings you joy and to then look for these things and make them happen, as best you can. Oh, if only it were that simple! If joy were simply a product that people could extract from themselves, then joy would be so simple. It would simply be a natural product of our hearts. But this is not so. The heart is not a beautiful dwelling place just for joy. The opposite is often true. The human heart seems almost self-destructive, wanting to do anything to make people unhappy. That’s why you must still scrutinize this general wisdom that says joy comes from within. The heart? Is it truly reliable to give us joy? Joy can’t be commanded. Joy also can’t be made in the heart. There is no recipe for it. And joy doesn’t even depend on external circumstances. There are enough sad people who are gifted with every earthly gift and yet acknowledge that they are deeply unhappy. The joy we see in Paul belongs in a completely different category. Because there, external circumstances don’t count at all. Yes, the joy that Paul speaks about seems to be insolently outraged against the negative external conditions. Because the life of Paul was truly not enviable. He sat in prison. At that time, prison was certainly no 5-star hotel. There were big rats and filth. It probably stunk horribly and there were diseases that we no longer know today... to say nothing about the cold and wet conditions. Before that, Paul had struggled for the Gospel in Ephesus for three years. (See Philippians 4:3) In some respects, he succeeded. But there were more than enough reasons to believe that he had also thoroughly failed as a missionary to the Gentiles. Laughed at by people, persecuted and beaten, he was ultimately thrown in jail. He would also probably be put to death. That is the situation Paul is in when he talks about joy. Joy is almost a rebellion against all these terrible things. To summarize, one can say: It’s a “*joy in spite of...*” perhaps with this sentence, we come a bit closer to finding out what joy truly is. *Joy in spite of...* is actually harder to steal away than *joy because of...* It is important to see the context into which Paul places the words about joy and the reason he has for joy. Right at the beginning it says: Rejoice **in the Lord** always. And the sermon text ends with the simple phrase: “**in Christ Jesus.**” To understand Paul correctly, it all comes down to these words: ***in Christ Jesus.*** In any case, this phrase says that it’s about a joy that we can’t create on our own. Joy must come from Christ. Joy means being in and with Jesus. Christ as the center of life, who gives our life a completely new purpose – I in Christ and Christ in

me. It means exactly what is stated – my spirit, my flesh, my body breathes in and out the living breath of Jesus Christ. I to Christ and He to me. Wherever I am, there Christ is too. And if I now think that He came too near to me, then Jesus is even closer to me than I can even comprehend. And this is not a matter for religious professionals. We all have this gift of “in Christ” when we are baptized. Paul must also certainly have known about how quickly we can move away from this center and how everything can then suddenly come apart at the seams. He also knows from work in the congregation how quickly this can happen – sometimes through false teaching and sometimes, as he describes here in the letter to the Philippians, through false worries. And how is it with us?

At the moment, joy is at the center for us too. It is Christmas joy. But it is a joy at risk.... the lights burn, the family mood is warmed up, and yet in the warm candlelight, there is the greatest sadness, maybe the poorest people too, perhaps especially because Christmas joy has become an illusion. It is a *joy because of...* and not a joy like with Paul, *in spite of...* The economy has actually set out with all methods and means to conquer joy. What has come from that is a parody! We celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus and we no longer have Him as our center. Instead, more and more imitations come into the center. Joy becomes more and more fabricated and fake. In the end, we have no choice but to fake joy. And then we shouldn't be surprised if sadness and depression get out of hand, especially at Christmas. Paul wants to bring us back to the center, the center is Christ Himself, and being centered in Jesus makes us free. It is clear, of course, that Satan is always trying to take us away from Jesus Christ. Paul warns us here against that. The Greek word for worry *merimna* means something like pressure or stress. Pressure can wind a person up more and more. But there comes a point when the pressure is no longer bearable. Then something has to break. That time will be reached at some point. The Greek word for stress means exactly that. Stress is pressure on the whole person, body and soul. When Paul warns us about stress here, he knows what he's talking about. Because there was hardly a person who had as much stress as he did. If stress is pressure, then at some point, the fuse must blow. That's what destroys us. Is there a solution? Being “**in Christ**,” that is the solution. Because when we are in Christ, movement comes into our thinking and our lives. I don't remain alone in my thinking. Dear congregation, it's not about never experiencing stress as Christians or about being able to cover everything up like aloof gurus. It's also not about faking joy. Even Christians experience sad things. Even Christians suffer from depression and many other things. But they aren't alone in this. Everything moves towards Jesus and the stress is absorbed into Him and carried by Him who carries the sins of the world on His shoulders. And then He doesn't leave us empty either. No, He gives us His Spirit and the strength that we need for our daily life. So our “being in Jesus” does not mean sitting still. No, it is a “back and forth,” an unloading and a drawing from of His strength. When Paul was still persecuting Christians, he had less stress in one regard... but Jesus was missing from his life. What were his nightly thoughts when he was persecuting and murdering Christians? And then came the change on the road to Damascus. His new life as an apostle was certainly not such that his stress was suddenly gone. Paul was also not like some kind of guru who could float over all distress as if the world no longer affected him at all. It was the complete opposite. One can even say that the stress of the Apostle Paul was significantly more now than before. And with all this, Paul knows how to speak about the center being in Christ. Later, Paul describes this center with the words: “peace that surpasses all human understanding.” According to rational common sense, Paul, the suffering apostle, has become much more unhappy. But's God's Spirit is even more than our common sense. Hence the cry: “*The Lord is near!*” That ignites joy! That is the real reason for our joy!

Therefore, when we cry out “Kyrie eleison,” which means “Lord, have mercy” before the beginning of each service, we greet the Lord in our worship. And when we hear the greeting of the pastor in the service: “The Lord be with you” and the congregation answers, “And with your spirit,” then we know that the Lord Himself is there – He is in our midst. Dear congregation, “the Lord be with you”, that's what we will experience again this week when we see the manger and Christ... this is true for every Sunday. In worship, the Lord is with us and by us. Worship as stress management... I never want to miss it. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen.