

July 21, 2024

Faith and Imagination: Why We All Need Church

Philippians 4:4-9

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

⁴ Rejoice^[a] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.^[b] ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[c] these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

In this, may we hear a word of hope.

I've been reflecting on this passage from Philippians for some time now. The longer I stayed with it, the more complicated it became, the more questions it produced, the more importance it gained. Rejoice, Paul tells us. Do not be anxious and keep your mind on the pleasing, the honorable, the just, pure and commendable. The exhortation is important, yet is it merely optimistic and trite, a kind of spiritual bypassing? Maybe some of us want to say, *Sure Paul, great idea, but how is it possible in the midst of so much to be anxious about?*

I began considering this passage after spending a week at Massanetta Springs Middle School Camp in Harrisonburg, VA. This is the camp run by Colleen Earp, the person who guest pastored at SPC in early April. Colleen invited me to attend as a workshop director and teach yoga to the middlers, their chaperones, and the high school camp leaders.

This year the theme of the camp was informed by the Philippians passage from this morning. "Rejoice in the lord always. Again I say rejoice...do not be anxious about anything...whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, worthy of praise, think about these things." This inspired the tagline for this year's camp message, "Keep calm and rejoice," which then informed every aspect of the week, the worship, songs, dances, skits, activities, play, even my yoga classes.

Part of me accepted this theme and the tagline, the whole of the message from Philippians, willingly. It was true and important in the quietest, most receptive place within me, yet the noise of my mind questioned: why is this true? How could this be? Even as I witnessed exuberant and

quiet, goofy and tender rejoicing at every turn, I wondered over the anxiety that I listened to and observed both youth and adults carrying. What to do with this?

Yet, I quieted myself: what if the answer is more nuanced and less binary than part of my mind wanted to imagine? I began to consider the “yes, and” of this message. For me that’s where most of the answers to any of life’s questions lie—in the *yes, and* that can hold the tension between knowing and not knowing, faith and deep questioning, anxiety and delight.

In the week after I returned home from camp, I found my first answer as I sat one morning engaged in a contemplative practice of spiritual imagination. That morning, listening to a passage from Mark, the disciples tossed and fearful on a boat in a stormy sea, I, too, found myself standing on that boat, a host of frightened disciples and me, in the middle of this stormy sea. I could feel the sensation of fear, of overwhelm, of uncertainty about what would come and if I’d be taken down. Then, I heard Jesus’ words: “Peace. Be still.” This time, though, in my imagination I sensed these words not only for the wind and the sea, but for me and all of us on the boat together. And then I remembered: this is what we can do for each other—like Jesus’ steady stance, one settled nervous system to another, we can coregulate and remember how to stand within the storm. Yes, stormy. And calm.

So then, how might I keep my own calm in the boat of today’s world? I don’t always know, but I do believe it’s essential I do so—not only for the calm itself, but so I don’t miss the delight that is also an ever-present part of creation, the rejoicing that we can remind each other of in the celebration of life itself. In that morning contemplative moment, I lifted my eyes above the waves. I could feel God’s presence with me. Again, I imagined myself again on that boat with Jesus and as I paused in stillness, I heard him say, “Look, there to the right, dolphins! A whole pod!” And I sighed because I almost missed it, my eyes closed in fear.

So come with me into this word, rejoice. It has two roots—the word “re” meaning “to return, or to do again” and “jois” meaning “to experience joy.” To do joy again. It’s a verb and reminds me that the insistence of joy, or I might also say, the insistence of delight, is not just a passive response to something I’ve experienced. It is the experience itself that we must return to over and over again. It requires a faithful choice to see and experience delight, that which Paul might call pleasing and worthy of praise, so we might rejoice. This is a muscle we can flex and strengthen.

Yet the questions, “How can we possibly be joyful in a time like this?” continue to be asked, not only by me, but perhaps by many of you, and by our youth. How can we keep our own calm, and rejoice? And why is it essential that we do so?

I’ve been hearing this refrain a lot lately: “If _____ gets elected president, we’re in big trouble.” Perhaps you’ve said this. Perhaps I have too. And while it speaks to a certain brokenness in this world and of a fear for an imagined future, I think it also speaks to a longing for something beautiful.

Sophisticated as our brains are, we have a rather primitive part of us that leans toward a negativity bias. We are more likely to pay attention, to remember, and to imagine our way into the negative and fearful. And as we pay attention to what is actually negative and what we

imagine will be, our nervous system and sensory perception responds to both-- the real and the imagined --in the exact same way, as if they're happening in real time. Often, then, before we can discern a wise response, our nervous system has reacted by telling us to engage and fight, or to armor and shut down, or to hide and numb ourselves. So then, I wonder, what is this doing to the whole of our existence and to our younger generations?

Ross Gay, one of my favorite poets and author of two collections of essayettes *The Book of Delights* and *The Book of (More) Delights*, says, "I often think the gap in our speaking about and for justice, or working for justice, is that we forget to advocate for what we love, for what we find beautiful and necessary. We are good at fighting, but imagining, and holding in one's imagination what is wonderful and to be adored and preserved and exalted is harder for us, it seems."

We're a church that speaks often about justice and so I find this message particularly important, and a question I've been asking myself: *How am I advocating for what I love and find beautiful and necessary? Am I holding in my imagination what is wonderful and to be adored and preserved?* Am I, not only for myself, but for the youth observing me? Choosing what I pay attention is a muscle I can build and flex daily. When I keep my eyes open, there is everyday delight, there is rejoicing in that delight. Paying attention to that steadies my nervous system and affects how I feel about living this life I've been given, affects how I respond in the living and how well I can stand in the boat.

And so, this returns me to our Christian tradition and the Bible passages that inform and inspire it. Paul exhorts us, it is true, but before that even we have something further back to look upon in the Psalmist, David, writing poem songs to himself perhaps, reminders of that which is to be adored and preserved, to be remembered.

Perhaps you'll try with me now, friends. I'll invite you to get comfortable in your seat, to take a breath in and now out. Put your hand on your heart and do that again. Feel your breath come in, and go out. Now feel your feet on the ground beneath you. You might decide to close your eyes or lower your gaze downward as you listen and imagine these words, the imagined scene and landscape:

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]

He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]

I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me
all the days of my life.

Take a breath again. Can you feel this passage? Can you hear the trickling water, see the sunlight sparkle on it? Can you see the table before you? Who is there with you? What abundance do you smell? Taste? Can you feel the touch of oil gently anointing your head?

Christie Purifoy, another favorite author, writes, “It isn’t enough to know that we yearn for God. Somewhere along the way we must also learn that creation is God’s good gift. It’s true identity is not the chaos and horror we observe on the nightly news. We must learn how to walk with God on the ground of our own lives, how to meet with God in our kitchens and neighborhoods, sidewalks and backyards... Only then can we begin to receive the life that is to come, the world that is to come. We imagine we are cultivating food or friendship or beauty. But we are, in all of these ways, cultivating God’s glory in our midst. We spread our tables and fill our plates with glory. And we rejoice.”

Friends, I believe I have a responsibility to paying attention to the delight that is present, to rejoice in community, to shepherd my imagination to that which is good and commendable—not only for the sake of my own life, but for the sake of those watching me, young and old alike. This is what church is to me: a community within which I might be reminded of the ways in which we can keep calm and rejoice in this broken world, so that I don’t miss the delight that is spread out like a table before me, anointing me and overflowing around me, each and every day.

We need practices to help us remember how to be steady, and then we get to look to the giant book of “yes, and” stories that is our Bible—a book of people wrestling with the complexity of life, failing in that complexity, experiencing and resting in God’s love for a time, witnessing and imagining the possibility for more of the beautiful, the essential, the pure, the pleasing, the excellent and commendable. We get to look back at this larger history and our own individual histories, us adults with as much or more past than future, to be the ones who can pause and in that pausing choose to remember how many beautiful things have come *alongside* terrible pain, how many beautiful things are happening around us right now. We can offer THIS understanding to our youth.

Creation is broken AND it is magnificent, joyful, celebratory in the small and everyday living. What could happen if we stubbornly, and justly, work together to stand, to remember our calm in the darkest valley, and see within that valley a more whole picture, not only the binary of our negativity? We see where we’re standing AND we witness so much to rejoice in, so much to love and preserve?

On the daily, this rejoicing comes through such simple moments. For me this week it was a sunrise that called me outside in time to see and be startled by a coyote standing in my driveway

too close to my home for comfort but so thrilling a way to start the day that as it ran, I followed it down my driveway to the bottom field to get a second glimpse of the creature and in the new vantage point saw both the wild creature and the gorgeous sunrise more completely; and morning walks at Morgan's Grove park where I breathed in the scent of Queen Anne's lace and diesel as I walked beside the fence separating park from railroad tracks; or the envelope I received yesterday morning with a note from one of our church members stuffed into an envelope filled with fragrant dried lavender intended to "bring me a smile." It is the Sunflowers decorating the front of our church today and the heartfelt and inspired interludes played for us by Sam. Why do I share this?

Perhaps this final quote, an exhortation I might call it, from Ross Gay might explain. He says, "What feels like a discovery has been given to me over these last couple years in conversation with readers who tell me they have taken up their own delight (or some ancillary noticing and paying attention to and thinking about what you love) practice. Quite a few of these people tell me that they do their delight practice with other people—a morning phone call of delights; a zoom delights group; a delight pen pal; a weekly amble of delights with a friend through the neighborhood. And several of these people have told me that their practice has inspired other people to do their own practices. As they thank me, sometimes suggesting I'm the origin point of their delight practice, I try to remember to point out to them that my delights have all been given to me; they've all been given to *us*. And they become more given, and more *received*, upon being shared. Which, quiet as it's kept, and believe me, it's kept quiet, we seem inclined to do: share what delights us; share what we love. And for the record, before you go there, I'm not being optimistic. I'm just paying attention." And so, friends, may we too.