

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Imprisoned Joy**  
*Philippians 1:1-14; 18b-30*

Have you ever noticed how joy is infectious? Some people, indeed some communities, exude joy. When I think of a joyful person I think immediately of a woman named Louise. Louise was a pastoral intern at the church we attended in South Bend, Indiana, in the 90s while she was studying at AMBS. I've continued to cross paths with her over the years when I've attend Mennonite conferences or events. It doesn't take long to know if Louise is present, because her spontaneous laughter will ripple through the atmosphere. I usually seek her out and sit next to her during at least one session just to be in the presence of such joy.

The letter that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, which we refer to as Philippians, indicates that it was a church characterized by joy. Unlike some of Paul's letters, which resonate with frustration over how some of the churches he had helped form were developing, this letter shows a "proud papa" Paul. Word from the Philippian church brought him joy. As we will see during the next few weeks, Paul's joy doesn't come from their perfection, but rather from their shared commitment to Jesus, their generosity, and their willingness to suffer for the new life they had found in Christ.

As we begin reading this short book—and I hope you will read it multiple times during the coming month (it's only four chapters long), I'd like to offer a bit of background. We learn some things about the church of Philippi from the book of Acts. You may recall the story from Acts 16 of Paul arriving in Philippi. When the Sabbath came he went to the river outside the city to look for worshipers. This suggests that there may not have been a Jewish diaspora population living in Philippi with a synagogue because that was usually where Paul would go first when he traveled and arrived at a new location. At the river Paul met a woman named Lydia, who sold purple cloth. She was a devout woman who quickly received the story of Jesus and became a believer. She offered her home as a meeting place for the developing Christian community. Lydia's leadership as a woman was not unique in this church. In the final chapter of Philippians we'll hear of Euodia and Syntyche, two women who Paul wrote "struggled beside" him for the Gospel. By the time Paul wrote this letter the church had grown sufficiently to have some leadership structure, for in his opening greeting, Paul greets the "holy people" (saints) along with the "overseers" (bishops) and deacons.

Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia. Roman colonies, were formed, in part, in order to disperse the retired members of the Praetorian guard, so they wouldn't be concentrated in Rome and pose a potential threat to Caesar. Roman colonies were well developed and fortified and their inhabitants were often proud of their identity as Roman citizens. Several things that Paul writes in this letter might not stand out for us today, but they would have had a particular meaning and impact for the original readers/hearers. In Paul's opening greeting he refers to the "Lord" Jesus Christ. Caesar used the title Lord, signifying that he was the ultimate leader. For Christians to publicly refer to Jesus as Lord was thus a strongly political statement. At one point in the letter Paul reminds the Philippian church that their "citizenship is in heaven." If they were proud to be Roman citizens, Paul was reminding them that they were not first of all Roman citizens who happened to be Christians. Just the opposite: they were Christian citizens who lived

in a Roman colony—a distinction that remains important, and a challenge, today. This conflict of interests, loyalty and identity may have led to the suffering that Paul acknowledges they are experiencing.

The style and form of this letter match the Greco-Roman convention of friendship or family letters. Paul doesn't identify himself as an apostle (as he does in some other letters), placing himself in a patron-client relationship. Instead he humbly refers to himself as a servant of Christ, as a partner with these people whom he obviously loves deeply.

Finally, by way of background, it is clear that Paul wrote this letter from prison since he refers to his chains and to his interaction with the guards. Many have presumed that Paul was writing from Rome. However, Paul was in prison on four different occasions and scholars are not of one mind about where, exactly, he was when he wrote the letter.

In this first chapter of Philippians we quickly note two things: Paul's imprisonment does not diminish his joy or his affection for the church he founded in Philippi, nor does it impede his life call—to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul does not write to the Philippians in order to say, “poor me,” or “it's all up to you to carry on now that I'm in chains.” Instead he says, “I know that you're going through an equally difficult situation and I'm strengthened by knowing that we are suffering together because of our deep love for Christ. He encourages them with the energy of a free man.

When Paul describes how his experience has affected the guards, I can't help but think that he must have been somewhat like my friend Louise. If he were simply a religious fanatic, I'm not sure the guards would have listened for long. But can you imagine what it must be like for a guard when a prisoner doesn't complain and swear, but offers thanks and regards you with dignity and laughs with you and says that he's glad to be in prison if it allows him to offer hope and good news to people he might not meet any other way.

We get a clue to where Paul's joy and hope rest in the second half of chapter one. Paul is evidently facing not only the restrictions of imprisonment but perhaps also the restrictions of ill health brought on by advancing age. Paul seems fully sincere when he describes the conflict that stirs inside him: on the one hand he longs to see this community of faith that he holds dear but on the other hand he has an equal longing to be united with God. Paul was a religious person from a young age and his religion became a living, breathing faith when he was struck blind in a spiritual experience in which he heard God calling him to follow the way of Jesus and the cross. As he dedicated his life to building up the body of Christ in the church, he deepened his personal communion with God to the point that he desired full union with God in death as much as he desired life.

This is something most of us can't imagine, and frankly, we don't talk about a lot. As Bill Clinton has quipped, when talking about the high cost of medical care in this country especially in the final months of people's lives, “For as much as Christians talk about heaven, they certainly don't seem too eager to get there!” Yet I believe Paul's acceptance of death was the very thing that energized his life. (repeat)

Several months ago Dick Westby passed along a copy of a story that offers a contemporary window into this interesting connection between death and life. Jim Forest, the former director of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and now secretary of the Orthodox Peace Committee, wrote in an article<sup>1</sup> published in *Sojourners* magazine in 1980, of a young

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Forest, “Astonishing Hope,” in *Sojourners*, February 1980.

man named Mel Hollander who went to Vietnam during the war as a civilian social worker. While he was there, and still in his 20s, he was diagnosed with cancer and given six months to live. The climate of death in Vietnam had already crushed his spirit and now death's invasion of his body left him deeply depressed.

He went to New York hoping to find a cure, but the doctors offered no hope. He heard that Union Theological Seminary was offering a course for those who work with the dying. He decided to take it. When he was registering, he heard of another course on a less practical topic—the book of Revelation—taught by Philip Berrigan, a former priest and peace activist. Despite his depression, Mel decided to take that course too.

On the first day of class Mel arrived and sat down. When it was time to start Philip Berrigan didn't begin talking and the room became quiet. This made Mel nervous. He didn't know that it was Berrigan's practice to begin every class with a period of silence. He became all the more nervous when he found Berrigan's eyes resting on him. He knew he looked sickly from the progression of his cancer and he wondered if others didn't think he belonged in the class.

When Berrigan finally talked he address Mel directly: "What's the matter?" he asked. Mel was inclined to say, "It's none of your business," but instead he answered: "I'm dying. I'm dying of cancer." Berrigan hardly paused before exclaiming: "That must be very exciting!"

Mel knew the normal responses to his news: shock, horror, the promise of prayer, uncomfortable silence. But this unexpected, impossible sentence: "That must be very exciting!" struck him like lightning, like an instant moment of enlightenment. Yes, it was true! This was the most extraordinary event of his life! He had never before faced death.

As it turned out, death wasn't as imminent as Mel and the doctors believed. His cancer mysteriously disappeared. After he left seminary he became a Quaker and worked full-time in the anti-war movement. When the war ended he worked with Vietnamese refugees and tried to address the problem of post-war repression in Vietnam. When Mel embraced death, his life began.

When we live in a country of abundance that elevates personal comfort and individual freedom above most other values, we are conditioned from an early age to fear suffering and death. But Paul viewed suffering as strangely life-giving because it drew him closer to Jesus' own experience of suffering. Paul did not seek out suffering in a masochistic manner, but he accepted it as one of the consequences of following Jesus.

Few of us will probably ever be imprisoned for our beliefs and convictions unless we choose to participate in civil disobedience, as some from this congregation have done in the past. But many of us find ourselves imprisoned, metaphorically speaking, by any number of things: the demands of our work—or not being able to find work, by ill health, emotional anguish or loneliness, by complicated, conflicted relationships, or the unexpected end of a relationship. Whatever prison we find ourselves in, let us listen to and receive the challenge of Paul "to let our love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" (1:9) and to "conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" so that we will "stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose [us]" (1:27-28).