

Love

Essay 2 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Paul, late in his life and under house arrest in Rome, Paul once stormy and passionate, now writes to the church in the city of Philippi in the Roman province of Macedonia, and what he keeps coming back to over and over is joy. He’s discovered the secret of being content in any and every situation. He has learned that somehow in all things, in absolutely all things, God works for the good of those who love him, that somehow – whether it’s clear to us or not – our lives are working out as they should. And so he composes this literary Ode to Joy we have as the Philippian letter. Now Paul lives joyfully, radiantly, unshakably joyfully. And in Philippians he tells us over and over how and why, beginning with Philippians 1:3-11.

“I thank my God”
– four words that can change your life –
“I thank my God.”

Paul begins with gratitude, always the place to begin, to wake up in the morning and realize what you’ve got, the pleasures that are yours, the people you know, the joy of being, and to thank “my God,” to realize God as yours.

Paul goes on.

I thank my God every time I remember you.
In all my prayers for all of you,
I always pray with joy
because of your partnership in the gospel
from the first day until now,
being confident that he who began a good work in you
will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right,
it is appropriate,
for me to feel this way about all of you,
since I have you in my heart;
for whether I am in chains,
a prisoner of the Empire,
or defending and confirming the gospel,
all of you share in God’s grace with me.
God can testify
how I long for all of you
with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer:
that your love may abound more and more
in knowledge and depth of insight,

so that you may be able to discern what is best
and may be pure and blameless
until the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,
that is, filled with the righteous behavior that comes through Jesus Christ
– to the glory and praise of God.

So I make three points, the first two briefly.

#1 – I call your attention to this concept of “partnership in the gospel” in verse 5. Paul first expresses joy over their (the Philippians’) “partnership in the gospel.” That catches my attention. Partnership in the gospel is not something that lights many people’s fire today, not even many churchgoers’ fire. So what’s going on? What does Paul see that often we don’t? He’s not just happy because people agree with him or because they’ve been baptized and aren’t going to Hell. What’s he see that often we don’t? Gospel. That’s what Paul sees and most don’t – gospel, great good news of a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, of a world in which everyone gets to start over, great good news that this is God’s world, enchanted and enchanting, great good news that God in Christ is in us. We have this oneness with God. We are, or can be, filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. And this can change, heal, redeem, transform, liberate everyone. And for Paul – and for all who see this – there can be nothing more exciting than getting this message out, and there can be no joy greater than working alongside people who know this.

#2 – There’s a phrase that stands out in this text. It’s “all of you”: verse 4, “in all my prayers for all of you,” verse 7, “It’s right for me to feel this way about all of you” and “all of you share in God’s grace with me,” verse 8, “how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Paul’s the kind of guy who comes into a group and loves everyone, not just the people who warm up to him, not just the people who have their lives in order, but all of them. He’s found a love that’s all-inclusive, not egotistic, not based on his comfort zone, but open to everyone. Paul has learned to love as God does.

#3 – And that brings us to the third point – Paul’s prayer (in verse 9) “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge,” more and more in sensitive awareness, more and more in the skill, the wisdom, it takes to distinguish between right and wrong, more and more in the ability to discern the things that really matter. It’s the connection between love and knowledge that’s critical. Love is always the way to knowledge. This is what Jesus said in John 14-16 when he told his followers that the Spirit of truth would guide us into all truth (16:13): if, he says, we remain in him (15:4,5,7), that is, if we embody him, if we stay in him; if his words remain in us (15:7), that is, if we devote ourselves to understanding Scripture; and if we remain in his love (15:9,10). And then he immediately went on to say, twice, “Love each other.”

Only love guides us into all truth, listening to one another, learning from one another, staying in spiritual community with one another, having spiritual companions to run your ideas by, letting your ideas meld and merge, caring about one another. Here’s the key.

It's love that guides us into all truth. On one moral issue after another, there are formulas that make ever so much sense in abstraction until you meet the real live person facing the issue. And those formulas by and large are not the truth, or at least not all the truth. The truth is what you do with those formulas after you begin to really love. If we go down deep into our hearts, we discover truth, in fact, truths that only the heart knows, like: What is really loving? What is really honorable? What is really driving me? What is really in the best interest of others? If this were done to me, would I find it to be kind and caring? It's all pretty basic stuff. When we get past our fear, past our egos, past the self-serving proof-texts wrenched out of living context, it's pretty basic stuff. This is why Jesus so often began his teaching with words that imply, "Who of you doesn't already know this?"

But of course love doesn't just happen. It takes work. It takes hard work. It takes hard soul work to set aside your ego, and your hurt feelings, and your fear, and work at a relationship, a marriage, a friendship. It takes focus – and keeping your focus. It's something we learn to do. It takes learning.

So where? Where do we learn to love? I think of a passage like 1 Corinthians 13. You likely remember it, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy ...," in which Paul, far from being sentimental or romantic, is reprimanding the Christians in Corinth, in effect, saying, "Don't you know love is not envious, love is not boastful, love is not proud? Don't you know love is not rude, it's not self-seeking, it's not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, it does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth? Don't you know love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always lasts?" He could have added "for all of you."

Paul is lecturing the church in Corinth because he has a vision for the church, a vision he shares with Jesus, and he knows the salvation of the world – the safety, the security, the future of the world – depends on this vision of a place a place where love reigns, where it's learned and practiced and spread. Everyone on earth needs such a place – Asian, Hispanic, black and white, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist, Israelis and Palestinians, rich and poor, gay and straight, wives estranged from their husbands, fathers estranged from their sons. Everyone.

There must be such a place – a gathering, a church – where all who come, all whose lives we touch, regardless of who they are or whatever they have done, will know that they can start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and then discover within themselves the Spirit of God. "All of them." There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where no one is left behind, where no one is judged or discriminated against on the basis of how he or she was born. There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where it is always safe to tell the truth about ourselves, where we can all experience the liberation that comes from being able to talk about our deepest secrets and struggles: a place where no one is left alone at night in a losing battle; a place where people can worship together and serve together even in serious disagreement with one another; a place that finally models for others how it might be that all could come together as one; a place open to people in process, open to people who haven't got it all figured out, who are wrestling with life's

toughest issues. There must be a place – a gathering, a church – where people master the arts of grace and forgiveness, where they learn to humbly hear one another and thereby acquire the otherwise hidden wisdom of others.

And this is what Paul speaks of in the Philippians letter when he writes, “May your love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what really matters.” So I am to abound in love. When I am annoyed by others, offended by others, hurt by others, maybe even feeling threatened by others, I am to draw on my higher self and abound in love.

And if I do this, it leads over time and with soul work to a place where we can shout with the male voice in “Ode to Joy” at the end of Beethoven’s Ninth, “Freude,” in German. In English, “Joy.”

– Dale Pauls