

Urgency

Essay 9 in the series “Ode to Joy”

“Therefore, my dear friends,
 as you have always obeyed
 – not only in my presence,
 but now much more in my absence –
 continue to work out your salvation
 with fear and trembling,
 for it is God who works in you
 to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

With these two verses, Philippians 2:12-13, we seemingly strike an almost discordant note in Paul’s Ode to Joy, the Philippian letter. And since I think of Philippians almost musically, and the title of this whole series of essays is drawn from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and its great chorale finale, “The Ode to Joy,” I am reminded of a form of classical music called sonata form. In sonata form two very different musical themes are introduced, offering strong contrast to one another. If one is fast, the other will be slow. If one is loud, the other will be light and pastoral. They do not seem to belong together. For a time, the two themes or perspectives clash with one another. Snatches of the two themes tumble over one another and contest one another. It can seem like chaos. The ear longs for the clarity of one theme or the other. And then at the end there is resolution, usually by the second theme moving over to the key of the first theme.

Now that may seem complicated but, in fact, this is how truth is always processed. Always. A theme is set forth. It’s clear. It may be beautiful. But there is a counter theme, maybe equally clear, maybe equally beautiful, that challenges the first theme. For instance, first theme, “God is sovereign, completely in control;” second theme, “We have free will; we are responsible for what we do.” Or to take another example: first theme, “I should go to Bible study;” second theme, “Maybe not.” Now these ideas clash in our minds, first, one theme, then the other, then just snatches of one or the other. Ideas tumble over one another. Nothing seems clear, and we long for the clarity of one theme or the other. Until one day we break through to a resolution. We see one theme or the other from a slightly different perspective. We change the key. And now we can see how both themes do belong together. And we can feel the music in our souls again.

Something like this is happening in the text under consideration now, and, in fact, happens throughout Philippians. The dominant theme is joy, and it is. But here now we have fear and trembling, as in, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” And so we seek resolution. And resolution begins, I think, with grasping a more comprehensive, biblical understanding of salvation. We read a text like this, and if were schooled by fundamentalists or by Hellfire T.V. evangelists, we hear, “Work your way out of going to Hell with fear and trembling.” But this is at best a very partial notion of salvation. It’s largely misguided – by which I mean, it’s wrong. And certainly in terms of our text and its context, it’s wrong. The biblical notion of salvation is so much larger and so much more life-affirming than this. Primarily it’s to be saved from danger, from harm,

from disease, from evil intent or violence, and it's very much a hands-on, this-world, here-and-now, real-life understanding of salvation. It affects all of life. It's God's vision for a new earth where his will is done just as it is in heaven.

So with that in mind, let's go back to the text. It begins with "Therefore," in light of what Paul's just been saying. Paul in our text is going back to Philippians 1:27, to when he urged the saints, the called-out ones in Philippi, to "stand firm in one Spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel," to be a band of brothers and sisters devoted to one another, absolutely devoted to one another. And then Paul begins to tell them how. He tells them (in 2:3-4) to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. That's all empty glory. Instead they are to consider others better than themselves, not just advancing and promoting their own interests but also the interests of one another." Then (in 2:5ff.) he urges them to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. They are not to hold on to their rights and privileges; instead they are to empty themselves. Remember! It's always about emptying ourselves. It's all about humility. It's all about: being aware of our own limitations; always being open to learning from one another; not forcing our way of thinking on others however right we may think we are; becoming the servants of all; taking out the garbage; cleaning up after one another; seeking to understand one another; taking care of one another; considering the needs of one another to be as important as our own.

Then Paul breaks out in cosmic triumph, with Jesus Christ, the one who emptied himself, being exalted to the highest place, every knee bowing at his name, every tongue confessing that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. It ends well. God's love wins through. It ends in loving reconciliation. Every knee bows in recognition of this God who takes the very nature of a servant or a slave. Every tongue freely confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord because one day people get it. After all the wasted years, all the unnecessary pain and loss and suffering, all the fear and anxiety, all the unnecessary anger and violence, they get it.

So now Paul says, "Therefore, in light of all this, my dear friends – Don't forget how much I love you! – as you have always obeyed, not in the sense of following some set of rules but in the sense of being devoted to God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." And the salvation in this context, in light of all that has come before, is communal. You guys, as a group, work out your salvation, work out the implications of what you now know about God. Don't mess up the group. Don't mess up one another. Be alert. Be vigilant. Catch the urgency here. Nothing casual is happening here. This togetherness that is church is not take-it-or-leave-it. It's about not messing up your life. It's about joy now, freedom now, life now.

Paul is saying: No half-measures here – instead, urgency. Work it out with fear and trembling, with deep, abiding reverence, with awe at what you're a part of, with humility and with no empty glory. Heaven on earth depends on this. Life depends on this. Joy depends on this. Freedom, that true spiritual freedom when you are not weighed down by your lower nature, depends on this. Your witness in this world depends on this.

Now it may not be easy. It may be work, hard work, to set your ego aside, to not need to have your own way, to respect the thoughts of others, to yield to the insight and guidance of others, to care about the needs of others as much as you care about your own. It may not be easy. It may be work, hard work, to make time for one another, to give the money it takes to be the church you can be, to make space in your hearts for one another, to maybe give up some personal dreams for one another. But you can do this because you are not alone. “For it is God who energizes you, it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” The world is yours, and worlds beyond worlds. You cannot fail in this because God is behind you, beside you, beneath you, above you, all around you, as close as the air you breathe. God will supply whatever you need if you want it.

We are called then to urgency, to a sense of urgency. Urgency about what? Urgency about our togetherness. Though everything in our culture conspires against us in this, it does come down to our togetherness, being one from the heart and devoted to the gospel of a world lit by resurrection and open to the spirit of God, where grace reigns, where somehow in all things, in absolutely all things, God works for our good, where our lives are filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. It does come down to in humility counting others better, looking out not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others, looking out not only to your own concerns but also to the concerns of others, looking out not only to your own needs but also to the needs of others.

And it may not be easy. It may be work. It may be hard work. But therein lies joy!

– Dale Pauls