

“In Any and All Circumstances”
Philippians 4:4-7, 10-13
16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Ben Dorr

A little over a year ago, in the summer of 2021, a story appeared in the news about a family in China whose son was abducted as a 2-year-old back in 1997, and this son had been missing ever since.

The father, Guo Gangtang, spent the next 24 years traveling across China on a motorcycle looking for his son. He had a flag attached to the motorcycle with his son’s 2-year-old picture on it.

He risked life and limb on the road.

He ran out of resources.

And then, in 2015, a film was made about this father’s quest to find his boy.

He started an agency to help other parents in a similar situation. And some of those parents located their children—but this father—he still could not find his son.

Then, in the spring of 2021, Chinese officials were able to use DNA testing and they located the child—who was, at that point, a 26-year-old teacher.¹

If you search this story on YouTube, the scene of the reunion is wonderful.

Tears stream down the father’s face, the mother’s face.

They can’t stop crying.

¹ [Parents Who Never Stopped Searching Reunite With Son Abducted 24 Years Ago - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/us/asia/dna-testing-reunite-son-abducted-24-years-ago.html)

Imagine looking for your child for almost a quarter of a century, not knowing whether he's even alive, and then, miraculously, you find him!

You're reunited with him!
It is a scene of unspeakable JOY...

As I mentioned a moment ago, joy is the Westminster pillar that we are exploring this morning.

Why joy?
Because joy lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Do you remember what the angel said to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus?

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy...”

Do you recall how Matthew described that first Easter morning long ago?

The women “left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...”

Our first text for today was about joy.
Did you catch that?

Jesus tells two parables:
A shepherd finds his lost sheep.
A woman finds her lost coin.
And after what's lost has been found, they each say, “Rejoice with me!”

Just so, says Jesus, when someone who is lost returns to God and has been found by God, there is unbridled joy in the heavens, and in the heart and mind of God.

This is ONE WAY for us to think about joy.

Something tangible. Something we can point to, and say:

I have received this as a gift in my life!

It doesn't have to be about LOST and FOUND...

- Perhaps some of you have known this joy at the birth of a child, or the adoption of a child, when you waited a long time for that child...
- Maybe you knew it at a graduation ceremony, or a wedding, and the changing seasons of life—all you had been through, all you had been given—it just all washed over you, and you were overwhelmed with joy!
- Maybe you knew this joy when you thought your own life was headed downhill, and by what you can only describe as a miracle of the Almighty, God reached out to you, and God grabbed hold of you, and God saved you...

I suspect that every heart and soul in this room knows something about the joy that Jesus describes in these two parables. It is both transcendent and tangible, something we can point to and say...I never could have given myself this gift.

Show of hands—how many of you have something in your life that is God's gift to you, that is a source of joy for you?

Good, good.

That's the first way we can think about joy.

But there's another way to describe joy in our Christian faith.

This is a joy that comes not from receiving, but from giving, from sharing generously with someone else.

It's the kind of joy that Jesus was talking about when he told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, when he said to them, on the last night of his life:

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you...”

Last month in Waco, Texas, in the southwest regional final to get to the Little League World Series, a remarkable scene took place.

Kaiden Shelton from Pearland, Texas was pitching to Isaiah (or Zay) Jarvis from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Shelton threw a curveball that did not curve.

Jarvis tried to duck, but the pitch hit his batting helmet, knocking his helmet off his head and knocking Zay Jarvis to the ground.

For a moment, everyone is shocked, stunned—is Jarvis injured?

Is he conscious?

Will he be ok?

Thankfully, Jarvis was not severely hurt.

And eventually, he made his way to first base.

The game could go on.

But Kaiden Shelton, the pitcher, was not ok.

He wasn't trying to hit the batter, he certainly didn't want to hit anyone in the head.

And he's rattled.
He's having trouble continuing.
Shelton starts crying on the pitcher's mound.
He's unable to go on.

Zay Jarvis yells at him from first base, "It's ok! I'm ok!"

And when his shouts of encouragement do not have the desired effect, do you know what Zay Jarvis did? He left first base and walks across the field and approaches Kaiden Shelton on the pitcher's mound.

And what does he do?
He wraps his arms around Shelton.
Zay Jarvis hugs the pitcher who just hit him in the head with a baseball.

Fans in the stands are applauding, many are crying.
And there it is, on national television, for everyone to see.

Eventually, the game resumes.
But the scene goes viral.
It's covered by the news.
Jarvis and his coach are interviewed after the game.²

What was it that captured the hearts of so many people about that scene?

Jarvis's sportsmanship, of course.
But even deeper than sportsmanship, there was a sense of JOY.

² The video can be found at https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_id/34374905. I am indebted to a sermon by Dr. Rodger Nishioka, "Seeing Faith," preached on August 14, 2022 at Village Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, KS, for drawing my attention to this story.

Joy that came—not only because Jarvis was not injured, but from an act of kindness, an act of compassion, a generous and gracious act that became the headline, never mind who won the game that day...

So there's joy in gifts that we receive,
and perhaps a deeper joy in the gifts we freely give...

But there's a third kind of joy that the Bible speaks about.
It's what Paul describes in our second text for today, from his letter to the church in Philippi.

Do you remember what Paul says?
“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

It's a strange thing for Paul to say.
Do you know where Paul is when he writes this letter?
He's not at a baseball game.
He's not at a wedding or a baptism or being reunited with a lost child.

He's in jail.

Rejoice always?
Even in prison, Paul?
Even though you don't know, Paul, whether you will live or whether you will die, whether you be left to rot in that jail cell or perhaps one day be set free?

It sounds unrealistic at best, impossible at worst...like we're denying reality if we say rejoice always, in any and all circumstances...

I didn't see it, but it was reported that 12 years ago, after an earthquake had devastated Haiti, Anderson Cooper was reporting on the

scene and he was FLABERGASTED when he saw some Christians in Haiti, right after the earthquake, singing hymns.

Didn't they know what had just taken place?
Of course they knew.
But they also knew something else.

They knew that there is a deeper joy at work in the world, the joy that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians.

It was the great theologian Karl Barth who described the joy that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippians not as unrealistic joy but as DEFIANT joy.

I like that.
Not a joy that's dependent on his circumstances.
Not a joy that's dependent on what blessings he may or may not have received.

But a joy that comes from knowing he belongs entirely to God.

As Barth once put it,
"God did not create a neutral creature, but *His* creature."

Barth himself, of course, was not immune to the difficulties and losses that life brings. His own son, Matthias, was killed as a 20-year-old in a mountain-hiking accident. And yet, even the death of his beloved child did not keep Barth from preaching a joy that OVERCOMES such a terrible event.

How could Barth do this?

"It is...because He [the Risen Christ] is the Lord of our lives, because we belong to Him, because we belonged to Him before we

existed and will always belong to Him—to no one else, and certainly not to ourselves.”³

Put another way, there is a third joy that the Bible speaks about—the joy that comes not from receiving, and not even from giving, but from BELONGING.

Do you know about this joy?

I remember running into it once. It was 20 years ago, when I was serving as an associate pastor at the first church I served in Texas. We had a secretary there, her name was Betty Ann.

Betty Ann was from Lubbock, grew up in the same neighborhood as Buddy Holly.

Betty Ann was great.

She could be a little rough around the edges, but beneath the gruff exterior, she was a very giving person.

She would stand up for anyone on staff, she would go above and beyond for anyone at the church.

I’d been at that church about 4 years when late one evening, after I had gone to bed, I was awakened by a phone call. It was from the senior pastor of the church, he had just returned from the hospital. Betty Ann was dead. She had collapsed very suddenly that evening, right before dinner. I think it was an aneurysm. She wasn’t much older than I am today.

³ The quotes from Barth come from *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists*, by Ralph C. Wood, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

It was a devastating moment on our staff.
And a very sad day for our church.

I'll never forget the funeral.
The first hymn that we sang was "Jesus Christ is Risen Today."

It's a beautiful hymn, right?
Joyful hymn.
And I had all sorts of trouble getting through that hymn.

After all, Betty Ann died far too soon.
She left two daughters and her husband behind.
We weren't supposed to be there that day!

And when it came time for the responsive liturgy, I stumbled
through trying to say the words out loud.

And when it came time for the prayers, I had trouble focusing...

And then...toward the end of the service, something changed, and
it hit me.

None of that mattered.
You know why it didn't matter?

If I couldn't pray, the community of faith that I was sitting with—
they would pray for me.

If I couldn't believe, that church community would believe for me.
If I couldn't sing, that church community would sing for me.

That's what it means to belong to one another, to belong to God—
that's where we receive our deepest joy.

You see, what the practice of praising God does for us—

the “duty to delight,” as Dorothy Day once put it—
is it keeps us from idolatry.

It keeps us from believing that we belong to anything or anyone other than the God we know in Jesus Christ.

So I got to thinking this week about all the places I’ve seen joy here at Westminster.

I saw joy this past Thursday evening, when over 260 of you attended the celebration of our 75th anniversary...with the announcement that the mayor had declared September 22 as Westminster Presbyterian Church day here in Greenville...I looked at your faces, and I saw a lot of joy.

I see joy every time we have a baptism, and I’m walking down the aisle with the child, watching you look at the newly baptized child...and then I turn around, and I see an even deeper joy beaming back in the eyes of the parents of that child.

I saw it on the faces of our senior highs this summer, coming back from the mission trip in Memphis—I mean, I wasn’t feeling joyful because unbeknownst to me, I was coming down with Covid, but I looked at those teenagers who had given a week of their time this summer to serve and love neighbors in Memphis, strangers whom they had never met before but were eager to serve...and they were done with their week. I didn’t see TIRED. What I saw was JOY.

But you know when else I see it?

When one of you is struggling, and you decide to come to worship.

And you are surrounded by the disciples of Jesus Christ in this room with you...

People who—when you can't believe, they will believe for you.
People who—when you cannot sing, they will sing for you.

People who have promised to hold you up, no matter what
difficulty or grief or struggle you might encounter.

Because that's what pillars do, right?
Pillars hold something up, and without that pillar, where would we
be?

Hospitality, generosity, justice, imagination...and joy.
Those are the pillars of Westminster.
By the grace of God, that's what I see, every Sunday,
when I look out at each of you.

Amen.