

Coram Deo

Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura

Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi

Deo Volente

Sermon Preached at Stouffville United Church 168th Anniversary

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Joy Enough for the Journey

Philippians 1:1-11

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At teacher asked her students to bring in a symbol of their religion to school the next day. The first student stood up and said, "Hi, my name is David and I am Jewish and this is a star of David." Another student stood up and said, "Hi my name is Mary and I am Catholic and this is a Rosary." The third student stood up and said, "Hi my name is Jimmy and I am United Church and this is a casserole."

Right! We do that. We have a gift of hospitality and a gift of mercy in the United Church that we often underestimate. As a military chaplain I've worked with many faith groups and I can say that we have something others don't.

It is Stouffville United's 168 Anniversary today, with a ministry that extends back another 12 years when services were held in homes and schools which makes it a 180 years of ministry, worship and service. That's a lot of casseroles!

A minister was speaking in a church for the first time. After the service he was shaking hands at the back of the church and a young man with flaming red hair came up to him and said, "You read your sermon." After which the young man with the flaming red hair went back in line and waited to speak to the minister again. The second time, he came up and said, "And you didn't read it very well." The third time he said, "It was drab and boring."

Quite shaken the minister asked the Elder of the church, "What is with the guy with the flaming red hair? To which the Elder said, "Don't pay any attention to him. He just repeats what everybody else is saying."

Sometimes life is just like that, "it doesn't cut you any breaks".

St. Paul understood that. He met criticism, controversy, and crushing times head on. And yet, he gave thanks. He didn't give up. He didn't give in. He got going. He didn't live under the circumstances, he lived above them.

Life can be crushing and confusing: However, we can choose to be thankful anyway.

St. Paul was thankful despite his circumstances because he remembered the **love**. He remembered and gave thanks for the love that was shown him by the Philippians and his love for them.

He wasn't focusing on his problems. He was focusing on the underlying purpose of his life. We live in a world where people are lost and alone; where people are looking for love in all the wrong places.

People search for love as if it were a city lost beneath the desert dunes. Each child rediscovers it, each couple redefines it, each parent reinvents it. The word can mean nothing, or it can mean everything. We say it in relation to things we eat and wear, and to those we eat with. We say, "I love Baskin and Robins ice cream. I love that sweater. I'd love to go skiing. Or "Daddy loves you." It can be such a sloppy word. Yet, it can be so wonderful.

"How much do you love me?" a child asks. And we say as we fling open our arms and stretch out our fingers to try to grasp the world and bring it in, "I love you this much!" Or, we say, "think of the biggest thing you can think of and then double, no triple, no a hundred times that I love you."

When Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote her famous sonnet "How do I love thee?" she didn't "count the ways" because she had a mind for math, but because as an English poet she was trying to convey and search for ways to tell of her love for her beloved.

Love is powerful. We all seek to have it. We all need it. Love is perhaps the basic human need. Someone once said that "Life minus love is zero." The great psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, declared that "Love cures people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it." And we are probably all familiar with the quote by the Roman statesman and philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who lived at the time of Christ. He said, "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." And throughout history people have written about, sung about, and thought about love more than perhaps any other single human need. It has been said that, "What the world needs now is love".

A professor once asked, "What is love?" One student said, "Love is dancing cheek to cheek amidst stardust." Another student said, "Life is one thing after another. Love is two things after each other." Another said, "love is a feeling you feel, when you feel you're going to feel a feeling you never felt before."

However, one is left with the thought that love is only a feeling. And that is when we get into trouble because when the diapers have to be changed –and as a father of 5 children and

having cared for nearly 1000 crack and heroin babies I know what I'm talking about when I say the diapers have to be changed, and then the garbage has to be taken out and the dishes have to be done; the feeling you felt, when you felt, you were going to feel a feeling you never felt before vanishes. And you wonder if love is only a feeling. It is not. It is a choice we make and a commitment you take to heart.

That is why Paul gave thanks because he had that kind of love in his life, because he had Christ who died on a cross for him, and those who believed in Christ who were sacrificing for Him.

Paul was thankful despite his circumstances because he remembered the love, and looked for the **laughter**.

Philippians is known as the epistle or letter of joy. It speaks of joy, rejoicing and thanksgiving more than any other part of the bible; and yet, St. Paul was in prison. I don't know about you, but if I had just been beaten raw, chained to a guard who is therefore in prison with me in close enough proximity "to reach out and touch someone" and not how "Bell Mobility" is advertising, I wouldn't be rejoicing. I'd probably be screaming. But Paul was rejoicing and thanking.

He didn't allow his circumstance to dominate his attitude. Too often we do. Instead of celebrating life, we are crushed by it. We simply endure life; we don't enjoy it. Paul didn't allow his circumstances to crush him because he chose to look at them differently.

A little boy was overhead talking to himself as he strode through the backyard, baseball cap in place and toting ball and bat. "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world," Then he tossed the ball in the air, swung and missed. Undaunted, he picked up the ball, threw it into the air and said, to himself, "I'm the greatest play ever!" he swung at the ball again, and again he missed. He paused a moment to examine the bat and the ball carefully. Then one more time he threw the ball in the air and said, "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world." He swung and missed. "Wow", he said, "What a pitcher."

He had the right attitude. Our attitude determines our altitude and we choose our attitude.

Victor Frankel a survivor of a Nazi death camp and Psychologist said, "The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

James Allen says, "You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you."

Sow a thought, reap and act

Sow an act, reap a habit

Sow a habit, reap a character

Sow a character, reap a destiny.

It all begins with the right thought. And as I said, last week the word think and thank come from the same root word. So, if we would think more, we might thank more.

Paul understood this. Paul found humor in humble surroundings and even in the midst of horrible situations. He found a reason to rejoice regardless of the situation. He didn't just wait.

He wasn't among the "if only" group. If only I had a better job, if only I married a different person, if only I got that promotion, if only I lost some weight, if only if only if only, there was a land of beginning again where all my heart aches and all my heartbreaks could be dropped like a dirty old coat.

There is.

There was a woman at a Chuck Swindol conference who wrote to him about how she had 12 children starting at the age of 32. She married a man at 31. Until then she wondered if she would ever be married and hear the laughter of children. She wrote to tell Swindol how it all changed that day she prayed this prayer. "Father in Heaven, hear my prayer and grant it if you can; I've hung a pair of trousers here, please fill it with a man."

The story didn't end there. A few months after telling this story he got another letter from a concerned mother of a son who had been at his conference. She said, "should I be concerned, my son has been hanging a bikini on his bed post each night."

Paul has Joy enough for the journey because he remembered the love and looked for the laughter and found the lesson.

Paul said I want you to know brethren that what has happened to me has really worked out for the benefit of the gospel. It is reminiscent of when Paul said, "All things work together for good." Notice that Paul didn't say, that all things are good. Far from it. There are many things that are not good. But if we allow God into them, He will work out some good from what is bad.

Look again at Paul. There he was in prison, having been chained, and beaten. Then he says, "I want you to know brethren, that what has happened to me, has really actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel." He is saying, even this is grace. Not only for him, but for others.

Stouffville United has come through a lot as we all have during Covid. But we can say as our history of 168 years tells us -as Paul said it really has turned out for good.

Although Henri Matisse was nearly 28 years younger than Auguste Renoir, the two great artists were dear friends and frequent companions. When Renoir was confined to his home during the last decade of his life Matisse visited him daily. Renoir, almost paralyzed by arthritis, continued to paint in spite of his infirmities. One day as Matisse watched the elder painter working in his studio, fighting tortuous pain with each brush stroke, he blurted out: "Auguste, why do you continue to paint when you are in such agony?"

Renoir answered simply; "The pain passes, but the beauty remains" And that is something to be thankful for.

You think about that. Amen.

Semper Fidelis

John