**The Threat of Joy**

Isaiah 25:1-9
Philippians 4:1-9

The apostle Paul, who writes his letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison cell, would have understood the plight faced by the seven young Iranians arrested last May for posting a video on line.

Because of their actions these young Iranians were sentenced to six months in prison and 91 lashes. If we knew nothing about this story, we would probably assume that they had been involved in some type of protest movement, calling for greater freedom, challenging the conservative religious leaders of Iran. Certainly they had to do something that was a threat to those in power to warrant 91 lashes and six months in jail.

In case you missed the story or have never seen the video, I thought I would play a little of it for you this morning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg5qdIxVcz8>

That’s pretty much it. It keeps repeating “Because I am happy”. There is no call to over throw the political and religious leaders, no call to hit the streets and demonstrate, no call for an Iranian version of an Arab Spring. Apparently the Iranian leaders are threatened by Pharrel William’s hit song “Happy”.

 The Iranian students were given the option of a suspended sentence if they publicly repented on TV and engaged in no more wrong doings.

I doubt the Apostle Paul was given the option of repenting his happiness. Nor would he have taken the offer if it were given. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes how often he has been in jail, beaten with whips, rods and stoned.

 Paul is in prison when he writes his letter to the Philippians and as he often does he offers his guidance about living together in community and giving witness to the justice and love of Jesus Christ. At the core of Paul’s advice is the very thing that gets these Iranians and no doubt Paul himself in so much trouble. Here is what Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”. You can almost hear Paul singing along with the lyrics of Phrarrel Williams’s song, “Because I’m happy.

Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. Because I’m happy. Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth. Because I’m happy. Clap along if you know what happiness is to you. Because I’m happy…

Paul knows what happiness is to him. For Paul it is the same happiness that infused and energized the prophet Isaiah who looked at suffering and injustice with the confidence of one putting his faith in the love of God at work in our world.

It is Isaiah who proclaims, *for you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled…* *This is the Lord for whom we have waited; Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation”.* Sitting in jail, subject to beating and lashes, Paul’s joy is firmly rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ in whom Paul experiences firsthand the love and justice of God about which the prophets speak.
 “Because I’m happy.” My first response to the arrest of the young Iranians was how ridiculous. What possible threat can happiness pose to these rulers? Paul fully understands how joy can be a threat to injustice, to suffering of any sort. One of the things held in common by the leaders of Iran, the leaders of Rome and the daily struggles we encounter in our own lives is their ability to make us fearful, cause us to worry about what will happen next if we fail to conform or don’t do the right thing. Worry and fear are not only major resources of injustice, they also keep us from living our lives fully and richly. If I worry about what might happen, will happen, is going to happen tomorrow, it becomes impossible for me to experience and embrace the joy that is present right now. Joy stands in opposition to fear and worry. By claiming joy, by claiming happiness, Paul is refusing to be intimidated by worries and Paul is refusing to be intimidated by authoritarian rule. “Because I’m happy.”

 Paul also recognizes that happiness when lived out in a community tends to unite us, bring us together in common cause. Whether suffering is the personal sort which comes from loss and disappoint or suffering that comes from injustice, for suffering to be sustained, it needs isolation, it requires division and separation. This is why Paul is concerned about the conflict that has developed between these two strong women leaders in the church of Philippi; Euodia and Syntyche. Nothing is said about the cause of their disagreement or conflict, but Paul knows that division is the ally of injustice and suffering. If you want the power of Rome to have the upper hand or forces of injustice than let small conflicts turn into big divisions. If you believe everyone should soldier through on their own, no matter, how difficult life becomes, than there is no particular reason to be concerned about divisions in a church where people pick sides. But Paul believes that unity is fundamental to wholeness, to well being and the salvation of God. For Paul joy and happiness found in Christ is the antidote for division, the antidote to isolation. “Because I’m happy.”

 Paul, of course, does more than just talk about happiness and joy, he offers concrete suggestions to the Philippians and to us about how they might experience joy in their lives together. Number one, “Be of the same mind in the Lord.” Our unity, the oneness that brings us together is the love we encounter in Christ. It is a core value, a core conviction and whenever we lay claim to the promise of Christ’s love, we are laying claim to joy. This is why Paul says, “let your gentleness be known to everyone.” We may get annoyed with one other, we may get angry with one another, but if we are united in joy, our anger, our frustrations are tempered by the joy we share. It is hard to stay angry with someone when we are happy.

 A second strategy Paul identifies for letting joy prevail is to “trust the nearness and presence of Christ, “In everything” says Paul, “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let you requests be made known to God.” If we hold onto our frustrations, our anxieties, our worries and fears, they have a way of becoming a lot like mold on bread that just keep growing until there is nothing left but mold. Paul encourages us to let go of all those things that trouble us by giving them over to God who is near at hand. Anger, frustration, worry and fear fill up our emotional space, but when we let them go, when we hand them over to God, joy can take their place.

 A third strategy employed by Paul for embracing joy has to do with what we allow to fill our hearts and our minds. If you spend a good deal of your time listening to angry people on FOX news, CNN or any of the 24 hour news shows, not to mention talk radio, it will come as no surprise to Paul that you may not be a very happy or joyful person. This is why Paul says, “*Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”.*

 Cherokee Park United Church is a community of faith committed to the love and justice of God. It is why we have a caring ministry and an outreach ministry, seeking to deepen and strengthen our capacity to care for one another. It is why tomorrow evening we are hosting a documentary called the Doctrine of Discovery, raising serious question about what justice might require of us today.

 The young Iranians sang “Because I’m happy” and they were a threat to the religious leaders in Iran. The threat of joy comes as no surprise to Paul, who writes to us from a prison cell, fully aware of what it means to live with the joy and happiness we find in Christ.

**Isaiah 25:1-9**

*It is the often the unfortunate fate of prophets to live in a time of considerable challenge. This is the case for the all of the prophets associated with the Isaiah tradition. The Isaiah prophet in our lesson today, shares the grief of the people of Israel whose homeland has been destroyed. Yet, in spite of the loss, Isaiah remains firm in the belief and trust that God stands on the side of the poor and the suffering. It is because of Isaiah’s faith in the justice of God, that Isaiah invites the people to rejoice in the salvation of God.*

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**Philippians 4:1-9**

*In our second lesson the Apostle Paul writes to the congregation he founded in Philippi. Paul has heard of the conflict that has developed between two strong women leaders. Paul reminds them of their deeper unity in Christ, that is stronger than any disagreement. Because of this great bond Paul says, we can rejoice in all circumstance. For Paul this mean rejoicing, even when he is confined to a prison, which is precisely where the letter is written.*

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.