

Holding On To Joy

Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul and the Whos down in Whoville share this in common. Life does not always work out as you either hope or expect. Most everyone knows the troubles faced by the Whos in Whoville as told to us by Dr. Seuss in “How The Grinch Stole Christmas”. Dr. Seuss tells us, “Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville, Did Not! The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason. It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right. It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all, may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”

Dr. Seuss goes onto tell us all the things about Christmas that the Grinch absolutely detests, concluding the list by naming the thing that most annoyed the Grinch, “Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing. They’d stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing! They’d sing! And they’d sing! And they’d SING! SING! SING! SING!”

The Grinch could take it no longer. “The more the Grinch thought of this Who Christmas Sing, the more the Grinch thought, “I must stop

this whole thing.” Dr. Seuss goes on to recount how the Grinch sets out to end all this singing by dressing up as Santa, sneaking in to Whoville and stealing everything having to do with Christmas. The Grinch began by taking all the stockings. He then took every present. He took the Who’s Feast, including the Who pudding and the roast beef. Why the Grinch even took the tree!

Like the Whos in Whoville were soon to discover, the Apostle Paul knows full well that life can be filled with loss, disappointment and hardships. The Apostle Paul sets out on a missionary journey with the intent of establishing new communities of faith based on the alternative Realm of God movement begun by Jesus, a movement standing in opposition to the domination values of Rome. Paul firmly believes that by living in the Spirit of the Risen Christ we can become a new creation. For Paul these small communities of faith are the yeast about which Jesus has spoken, they are the mustard seed, the place where transformation and change begin. Paul’s expectations for establishing and nurturing these communities of faith are high. But instead of preaching, teaching and proclaiming this love and justice alternative to Roman rule, Paul finds himself imprisoned by the powers of Rome. If the Grinch has ancestors, than some of those ancestors were likely officials in the Roman Empire, with “hearts two sizes too small.”

It is while Paul is stuck in prison that he writes a letter to the people of Philippi. The Philippians are particularly close to Paul’s heart

in part because they have been especially encouraging and supportive of Paul's ministry. It grieves Paul to know that ancestors of the Grinch are also stirring up trouble among his dear friends in Philippi, but that is precisely what appears to be happening and is what causes Paul to write his letter.

Paul's letter is much less precise than Dr. Seuss about the problems faced by the Philippians. Quite likely this early Christian community is encountering the type of persecution that has landed Paul in jail. In the opening part of Paul's letter, Paul takes note of the Philippians opponents, who are the source of their suffering, stating "since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."

There are Christians in this country who claim to feel persecuted because Jesus gets inadequate representation in our stores and shopping malls at Christmas. In Wadena, Minnesota, there are Christians who feel persecuted because they were forced to remove a Nativity scene from a public park. The Christians in Philippi to whom Paul writes face persecution because they are giving witness to the love and justice of God, breaking down social barriers between the rich and the poor, offering leadership roles to women, treating slaves as brothers and sisters, encouraging Christian owners to set them free. In short, these communities of faith are a threat to the domination power of Rome. My guess is the Grinch could care less about Jesus in the shopping malls or

stuck in a city park. If anything, the Grinch welcomes these distractions to the spirit of the Risen Christ. But, the Grinch's ancestors are more than eager to steal the faith being lived out by the church in Philippi. Whether it be personal hardship brought on by the struggles and losses anyone of us might face or the challenges that can come by living out the values of love and justice, Paul knows suffering provides an opportunity for the Grinch and the Grinch's ancestors to slip into our homes, our communities of faith, our lives.

A second opportunity for the Grinch's ancestors to slip into the lives and community at Philippi comes when two of their leaders, Euodia and Synthche, find themselves in conflict with one another. Members are being asked to pick sides between these two. A number of members, especially those who are newer to the community are saying to themselves, this is not what I expected or hoped when I became a part of this community of faith. Whether it be in our families, our neighborhood, our place of work or our church, division is one of those places where the Grinch and the Grinch's ancestors see an opening.

There is also a third possibility for the Grinch to be at work. Paul never mentions it in this letter, though he does mention it in his letter to the Romans when Paul confesses, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." According to Theodore Seuss Geisel, the real name of Dr. Seuss, the story of the Grinch emerged when one morning he looked at himself in the mirror and saw someone who had

become cynical about the world, losing the joy he treasured. Theodore Seuss Geisel looked in the mirror and saw the Grinch. The Grinch can slip into our lives and communities of faith through attitudes that we have allowed to flourish. If the first thing we do every morning is get up and see what the latest thing Donald Trump has said, my guess is we are creating an opening for the Grinch. Perhaps this was a dynamic for the people in Philippi.

As Dr. Seuss tells us the Grinch eagerly and enthusiastically waits to hear the cries of disappointment rising up out of Whoville when they discover the Grinch has stolen Christmas. “They’re just waking up! I know what they’ll do!” Their mouths will hang open a minute or two, Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!” “That’s a noice”, grinned the Grinch, “That I simply MUST hear!” So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear. And he did hear a sound rising over the snow. It started low. Then it started to grow. But the sound wasn’t sad! Why, this sound sounded merry! It couldn’t be so! But WAS! VERY! He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes! Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise! Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!

You know how the story unfolds for the Whos, with the Grinch returning all that he had stolen and the Grinch’s heart growing three

sizes that day. Dr. Seuss reminds us it is possible to resist the thievery of the Grinch in all the many forms the Grinch might take. But, Dr. Seuss only says it's possible. It is the Apostle Paul who reminds us the resources we are offered as people of faith, making it possible for us to hold onto joy, even when the Grinch would steal it from us.

To the people in Philippi and to us the Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice". Individually we may not feel like rejoicing. We may feel, for whatever reason the Grinch has completely cleared us out. As a community of faith we must make room for those who are grieving and facing loss, especially at this time of the year. It can be salt in the wound to be constantly bombarded by the superficial joy pumped out into the market place, holiday parties and other places that leave little or no room for heartache and struggle. But, even those of us who are struggling, even those of us facing disappointment, need our collective rejoicing, our collective song of joy that lifts our spirits and reminds us we place our faith in the living Christ, Emanuel, who is with us always.

To the people of Philippi and to us, the Apostle Paul says, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Faced with acrimony from within the community and antagonism toward the community from without, Paul says it is by letting everyone know and experience your gentleness that you resist the joy stealing ambitions of the Grinch. The people of the congregation in Philippi have every reason to live with

bitterness, anger and hatred toward those who create fear and terror in their lives. But, Paul knows that fear and terror are the tools of the Grinch and gentleness provides strength in holding onto joy.

To the People of Philippi and to us, the Apostle Paul says, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”. This is the model given to us by Jesus, who again and again, takes time for prayer. Rather than fill our hearts, minds and spirits with all the worst case scenarios of what might happen, Paul encourages us to let go of those anxieties and worries, by opening our hearts in thanksgiving to the One who is with us now. The Grinch is unable to steal joy from a community of faith that again and again turns to God in prayer and thanksgiving.

This morning we are blessed to share in the baptism of Adelena. It is for her parents, family and for us a wonderful moment of celebration. But, we know that the Grinch already has his eye on Adelena, seeking to steal her happiness, her joy at his earliest convenience. Our promise to Adelena is the same promise given to us all, we are given a faith that enables us to rejoice in the Lord always. Again we say rejoice. It is because of this spirit, given to us through Christ, that even the Grinch has the possibility of experiencing real joy and maybe even carving the roast beef.

Isaiah 12:2-6

The prophets of Israel never hesitate to directly name the troubles and failures they see among the people and particularly among the leadership. They speak often of God's justice for the poor and the oppressed. Yet, even as the prophets expose deep rooted problems, they do so with a confidence and trust that God is at work, providing the prophets and all who follow God's ways an ongoing sense of joy.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:4-7

Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison cell. His letter is written with a concern for challenges the congregation faces, including fear of persecution by Roman authorities and tension that has emerged within the congregation between a couple key leaders. With his own life in a prison cell as a testimony, Paul encourages the Philippians to draw on the resources of faith that enable us to live with a spirit of joy even in the most challenging of times.

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.