



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

From Shared Pain to Joy  
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Philippians 4:1-9  
October 15, 2023  
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Father Dick Murphy and Bishop Terence Kelshaw did not see eye-to-eye on nearly any issue facing the church. Father Murphy was one of the most progressive priests in the Episcopal Church in New Mexico. His congregation, St. Bede's Episcopal Church, flew the rainbow flag out front when that was unpopular, and the church experienced vandalism and bomb threats. Bishop Kelshaw was one of the most conservative bishops in the Episcopal Church. His study of scripture and his missionary work in Uganda led him to conservative convictions that ran deep for him. Father Murphy and Bishop Kelshaw clashed frequently over many issues facing the church.

Yet, the two of them had one thing in common. They both experienced heart attacks around the same time and they suffered from similar ongoing coronary issues. They visited and prayed with each other in the hospital, compared notes on the best cardiologists in the area, and shared lifestyle tips to help each in their journeys toward healing and recovery.

During these visits they were no longer Father Murphy and Bishop Kelshaw. They became Dick and Terence, two vulnerable humans who shared suffering and pain. When I saw these two together at my confirmation, despite their many disagreements, they joked with one another, and gave each other knowing glances that they shared an intimacy, a connection, and a narrative that went far deeper than the issues that divided them. What I saw between them that day was something akin to joy.

In our epistle lesson from Philippians, the Apostle Paul gets to the heart of the matter of why he has written this letter to the congregation. He is concerned about the disagreement between two women leaders of the church. Of course, during the nearly 100-year history of the Waffle Shop, we at Calvary have never experienced anything like that. But apparently such conflict has happened in other churches, including the church at Philippi.

Euodia and Syntyche were likely leaders of house churches and their disagreement had a disastrous effect, dividing the community into factions. Paul calls on a loyal companion to mediate their dispute. And he reminds Euodia and Syntyche of their shared history. He recalls how hard they struggled alongside each other to help plant and nurture this church in its first difficult years. He harkens the two women back to what they have in common, their willingness to work hard, their deep devotion to Christ and to telling Christ's story, and their shared birth-pangs in creating a vibrant community from nothing but a dream.

In feeling their shared pain and struggle, Euodia and Syntyche are invited to feel a gentleness toward one another. When we feel a gentle spirit toward someone else, especially someone from whom we've been estranged, we give space for two vulnerable hearts to beat in rhythm with each other.

These are the moments when Jesus is most near to us.

These are the moments that lead to joy.

Joy is something more profound and permanent than momentary happiness or temporary pleasure. It is bathed in the muck, mire, and tears of living a story – a shared story. The Greek word for 'rejoice' that Paul uses is plural. Nathan Eddy writes: 'Joy is incomplete unless it is shared. Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective.'

Frederick Buechner, who we are studying on Wednesday nights, puts it this way:

'Through the gates of pain, we enter into joy.'

Over the last week, we have witnessed and felt the gates of pain. Last Saturday, our hearts were broken by the barbaric acts of terrorism that were inflicted upon the people of Israel, resulting in horrific deaths and the separation of families. We fervently pray for the safe return of the hostages taken. Over the last few days, we have also witnessed the deaths and suffering of many innocent Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. It is a situation that is hard for us to comprehend, but we do know that our hearts are broken and bleeding.

I had the opportunity to travel to that region 14 years ago for a 2-week pilgrimage in the Holy Lands. During our time there, we were exposed to speakers from both the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. The Israeli speaker shared his family story of European Jews coming from being persecuted and killed during the time of World War II to at last find a new home in the ancient Promised Land. They longed to live the narrative, 'Never again another holocaust.' The Palestinian speaker told us that the best analogy to the narrative they felt they were living is the painful story of Native Americans in our country, who were displaced and persecuted in what was once their ancestral homeland. Two peoples living two different narratives, while living side-by-side.

What gave my fellow pilgrims and me hope was meeting children in a group called Kids 4 Peace. It is an organization that brings together Israeli and Palestinian children to get to know each other by learning and playing together. When the children all went to an ice cream parlor, the Palestinian kids would wonder why the Israeli kids became anxious when an adult came in with a backpack or a brief case. They would learn that the Israeli children had been taught to keep an eye out for such things because they could hide bombs and weapons that could kill them. The Israeli kids would wonder why their new Palestinian friends were detained longer when they went through checkpoints. The children felt each other's pain and resolved together to do their part in creating a more peaceful and loving world for the sake of their new friends.

After the violence of the last major war in Gaza in 2014, a number of Israeli mothers said enough is enough. They formed a group called Women Waging Peace. Palestinian mothers also reached the same point of being fed up and formed a similar group called Women of the Sun. The two groups met together around the Dead Sea last year. Their conversations were difficult, there was much on which they disagreed, but there was something far deeper that they shared - pain over the loss and potential loss of their children. After much time in building trust, they crafted together a covenant they named The Mother's Call, which ends with these words, 'We join hands in determination and partnership to bring hope back to our peoples.' Just three days before the most recent violence, the two groups of women marched together through Jerusalem and returned to the Dead Seawhere they unveiled a peace quilt they joined hands to create.

From the shared pain of Dick and Terence,  
from the shared pain of Euodia and Syntyche,  
from the shared pain of Israeli and Palestinian children and mothers,  
a shared narrative is slowly emerging.

Our call is to pray and act to nurture this new narrative of gentleness across the globe and in our own lives. Paul ends this passage assuring us that as we keep on working to bring about this new way of seeing each other through the lens of our shared humanity - 'the God of peace will be with us.' We move forward together in Christ's hope that from his and from all our shared pain ultimately will come joy.