



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

## The Community

SCRIPTURE:  
2 Timothy 4:9-22

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July 16, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

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I wanted us to see that brief video because it claims that eating, like most things, is better together.<sup>1</sup> But it also asserts that being together may take some intentionality.

We continue our conversation about joy. Joy— that elusive, courageous, life-giving disposition. It's deeper than happiness, because joy is not tied to things going well. Joy is tied to the confidence that the love that makes sense of the world has called my name. That I belong. That I have reason for hope.

I resonate with what David Whyte has said about joy.<sup>2</sup> It's a deep form of love. Joy is relational. It is not a solo act. Joy is personal, so it lives in me, but it is rooted in us. For that reason, I am again having us walk through this passage in 2 Timothy, which is clearly a favorite of mine. This is the third time in three years that we have read this together. And it's a bit odd because, for the most part, it's just a list of names—names of people who are part of Paul's life.

It's an odd text to read about joy. Except that we have already noted that joy is not a solo act. Joy is found in community. And in this passage, it is as if Paul is gathering in his mind the people who have shaped his life. Like every life, there are those for whom Paul is grateful and those who have caused harm. Demas is mentioned. He had deserted Paul. We don't know the details. In Colossians, Demas is mentioned as a colleague with Paul, but something happened and Demas deserted Paul.

And there is Alexander, who opposed the message. That was a public feud between these church leaders and it was painful. Paul says, "God will pay him back for his deeds." It sounds like Paul is expecting Alexander to be smote. But if I understand it, this is a warning to Timothy. "Leave Alexander alone." This

community was not that big, so Timothy would have known how Paul and Alexander had a falling out and if I understand the text, Paul is instructing Timothy to leave this alone. You can't fix this and if you try, you are likely to make it worse. Let God make right what we can't make right.

As Paul rehearses these names, it becomes clear that Paul comes to the end of his life and finds himself in a hard place. Not only is he a resident of Caesar's prison—locked up because of his trust in Jesus Christ. But probably harder than that is the fact that friends of his have abandoned him. In the midst of this terrible time, which Paul names with honesty, he also lifts up the names of people who have stood with him, people with whom he has shared ministry, and that is a bond that doesn't go away.

You can hear the gratitude in his voice when he says, "Luke is with me." New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, wonders if Luke might have been Paul's scribe—the one who actually wrote down what Paul dictated. What is clear from the letter is that Luke chooses to stand with Paul, remaining faithful in Paul's difficult season and I think that is a source of joy.

Paul mentions Mark and says, "Bring him, he is useful to me." That may come as a surprise because Paul and Mark also had a falling out. It is told to us in the book of Acts. Mark was accompanying Paul on a missionary journey and for some reason, Mark leaves. He returns home. It appears Paul felt that was an unfaithful choice. Paul later goes on another journey but refuses to take Mark this time. Mark could not be trusted. It was tense. But it seems that is all in the past now, and Paul, before he dies, wants to see Mark again. "Bring Mark. He is useful to me."

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1 The sermon began with a video. If you wish to watch it, go to: [youtube.com/watch?v=yLsSy64xILLI](https://youtube.com/watch?v=yLsSy64xILLI)

2 David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words* (2015) p. 128.

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This entire letter is written to Timothy. A man Paul calls his ‘son in the faith.’ He writes to say, “I need to see you one more time. Do your best to come before winter. I’m not sure I’ll make it another winter; I need to see you one more time.”

It is a reminder that even apostles can’t make it on their own. Paul’s joy is tied to his relationships with these people. If we are going to know joy in our lives, then we are going to need to pay attention to the relationships in our lives because joy is not a solo act.

Author Nicole Cliffe asked Twitter: “What’s the kindest thing you have witnessed?” She received hundreds of responses, as is typical on the internet, but one story in particular went viral.

A man named Joe responded with a story about a time when he was the manager of an LGBTQ bookstore. He was working in the bookstore and received a call from a stranger who said that they were considering self-harm.

Joe panicked because this was a bookstore, not a crisis center. He could give you *The New York Times* best seller list a whole lot easier than he could give you crisis advice. But Joe wisely assumed that as long as he had that person on the phone, they were safe. Joe started talking. He started asking questions. He stayed curious. He stayed on the line, and as he did, a line of customers, ready to purchase books, began to form. As they did, they began to catch on to the nature of Joe’s call.

After awhile, a middle-aged woman came up to Joe, put her hand on his shoulder, and gently said, “My turn.” He handed her the phone and she proceeded to spend the next several minutes talking to this stranger herself, telling this person that it would get better and that they were not alone. As she talked, a line began to form—not at the register, but at the phone. People began waiting in line to speak kindness to someone who needed to be reminded that they were not alone.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever it was that called that bookstore was fortunate that he or she found grace and love on the other end of the line. But I would suggest that for you and me, let’s not be so casual about it. One thing

that Paul teaches us is that we should be wise about who we choose to lean on, who we choose to admire, who we choose to let inform our own sense of who we should be. Paul makes a list of the people in this life that keep him grounded, that give him peace and are a source of joy. And when he needs it most, he reads the list and he asks them to come.

I have told you several times about a practice of mine. I carry with me in my wallet this worn-out piece of purple paper. It looks like I should have thrown it out years ago, but I can’t do it. Because on this paper I have written a collection of names. They are from various stages and places in my life. And no one on the list knows they are on the list because it’s not for them; it’s for me.

On this piece of paper is listed the names of people who have taught me what it is to be Christian. There are people here who have inspired me. There are people here who have forgiven me. There are people here who have demonstrated courage and grace and love. I don’t look at this piece of paper every day, but I look at it every day I need to.

Last month in Montreat, I shared with the youth that this is my practice and I told them about one of the names on the list. It’s Dr. Bob. I told them of his courage, how he gave voice to those who had no voice, how he stood for a church defined more by who we welcome than by who we keep out. I also told them of how for 50 years of ministry and for almost 30 years of retirement, he urged us “to be of good cheer”—to have the courage to choose joy.

I carry his name with me and it brings me joy. And this little piece of paper has taught me that joy lives in relationships. As David Whyte said, it is a deep form of love. Cole Arthur Riley, a young Black writer and poet, has said joy is inherently communal.<sup>4</sup> I think she is right. She says that joy like this is less a form of happiness; it is a form of peace because it is rooted in the knowledge that we are loved, that we belong, that we have others in our corner, that our lives are not a solo act.<sup>5</sup> That there is a list.

So today I want to invite you to take a moment and think about who might be on your list. Choose

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3 I am grateful to my daughter, Rev. Sarah Speed, who shared this story at the Montreat Youth Conference, June 2023.

4 Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh* (2023) p. 164.

5 Riley, p. 167.

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wisely. We have placed little slips of purple paper in the pews. Take one of those and think about who has inspired you. Who has taught you? Who has loved you? Who has shown you what joy looks like? Who has shown you what it is to be Christian? If you needed someone to come before winter, who's name

would you call?

Take some time to think about that and write their names down. Carry them with you. You won't need to look at them every day, but you can look at them every day you need to. And if you are like me, it will be a source of joy in your life.