



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

The Secret

SCRIPTURE:
Philippians
4:4-7,10-14

July 23, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II. He left letters and papers from his time in the Tegel prison camp that have provided inspiration and challenge to the faithful for the past 75 years. But it wasn't only his writings, but the way he lived in the camps that caused notice. In a poem titled "Who Am I?" Bonhoeffer speaks to his oppression, describing feeling "restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage." But at the same time, others saw something different in him. He writes, "They often tell me I would step from my cell calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house... They tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win."¹

No doubt he was both, but to be anything other than devastated, it seems Bonhoeffer discovered a spiritual secret on how to face the harshest of times.

I say secret because that's the word that Paul uses.

Like Bonhoeffer, Paul is writing from prison, and he writes, in my opinion, the most joyful letter in the New Testament. As he nears the conclusion of his letter, he writes, "I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need."

I have to admit, when I woke up last Tuesday morning still without power, I was not feeling that I had learned the secret. When it comes to joy in the face of harsh circumstances, I still have some things to learn. Which raised a question for me. Paul says he had learned the secret, but he doesn't tell us what the secret is. It seems like telling us what that secret is would be helpful!

One of the most prophetic, powerful and challenging letters ever written in American history is

Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from Birmingham Jail. Had it been written 3,000 years ago, we would likely find it squeezed somewhere between Jeremiah and Amos. In King's writing, you can hear the insistence that America live up to her ideals. In it, you hear his fatigue, less with the overt racists than with the people of good will, who insist that the oppressed just remain patient with injustice.

But King is known not only for his writing from jail. We also know that when imprisoned, he also sang. He sang songs of hope, songs of defiance and songs of joy. Harvey Cox, professor of religion at Harvard, experienced that singing. He said when he listened to young jailed men singing "We Shall Overcome" at the top of their lungs, it was the surest he has ever been that the one who was crucified was raised—and was right there in that cell.² To use the language of the day, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew the secret of facing injustice with joy.

I wish I knew the secret, so that I could tell you. It would make this a much better sermon. So, why do you suppose Paul says he knows the secret, if he is not going to tell us what it is? That seems like a pedagogical breakdown. I'll come back to that.

I was here officiating a wedding last night. It was so joyful. The couple loved one another, no surprise, and they had been looking forward to this day for some time. I could see the joy in their eyes when they promised to be loving and faithful. You know—the promise to be loving and faithful in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health. And if you have made that promise—oh, more than a month or so ago—you might know that, from time to time, it can be a difficult promise to keep.

Sometimes I get to share that moment with people who know full well the demands of that promise,

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who Am I? Letters and Papers from Prison* (1953) p. 347.

2 Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard* (2004) p. 284.

because they have made that promise before, and for one reason or another, it didn't work out. But they come again, with the full knowledge of the plenty and want, the joy and sorrow, that awaits every relationship and still they choose love. To do so is like experiencing resurrection—the gift of new life on the other side of hardship.

I think couples like that know something of what Paul talks about when he says, “I have learned the secret of being well fed and of being hungry, of having much or of being in need... of plenty and want.” Joy and sorrow, sickness and health.

Of course, it would be nice if Paul had spelled out the secret... not kept it a secret. Maybe Paul doesn't tell us because he has already told us.

One thing that is noticeable when you read this joyous letter is what is not written here. Paul spends not one syllable asking why he has to face such rotten circumstances. He does not ask: Why must this happen to me? He doesn't blame God for his imprisonment, for his neediness, for the meanness of the Roman Empire.³ We tend to tell ourselves that suffering is an aberration to a normal life, but Paul seems to think that life and suffering go hand-in-hand. He clearly doesn't believe that a righteous life will shield one from suffering; after all, look at Jesus' life. There is no “Why me?” in Paul. Every life knows plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health. Every life.

That may be part of the secret but I don't think the secret is found in what's not in this letter, but in what is written here. If I understand it, it is found in the first word Paul utters. The letter begins: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ.”

Servants of Christ. It's interesting that Paul identifies himself that way because the Philippians don't need a résumé. They know Paul. They love Paul. They don't need him to tell them who he is. But Paul is not providing them with information; he's reminding them of something they need to remember. What Paul says is: I belong to Christ. I live for Christ. Just as Christ lived his life for me, I am living my life for Christ—that is the source of my joy. That shapes my every moment. When we trust that we belong to God, it changes us.

There is a kid named Alex, who I have never met, but I think he is an illustration of what this looks like.

In 2016 Russian forces dropped bombs on Aleppo, Syria. There are people called the White Helmets and they rush into buildings that have been bombed attempting to rescue those who can be rescued. While these efforts happen all the time, one particular moment was captured by the media. A little boy named Omran Dagneesh was rescued and placed in an ambulance. His picture was broadcast around the world. I remember when that happened; we prayed for him here at Village. But like so many problems, it seemed too big to know just how to respond. But there was a little boy named Alex who knew what to do. Sometimes when it comes to the secret of joy, children are our best teachers. Alex wrote a letter to President Obama. I want you to listen as Elijah reads that letter for us now.

Dear President Obama, Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties, and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English, too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan. Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he [can] smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it. Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come!
—Alex (6 years old)

“Would you go get him and bring him to my house? We will be waiting for you.” That's what the secret looks like. It's remembering who we are; who we all are. We are all God's children.

In Bonhoeffer's poem “Who Am I?” he names the tension of feeling like a bird in a cage—desperate and gasping while also being calm and commanding—stepping from his cell like a squire from his country

3 Rev. Joanna Adams' sermon “Gratitude in Plenty and in Want” preached in 1993.

house. At the end of that poem he states, “Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

I think that is what Paul said: Paul, a servant of Christ. Paul, one who belongs to Christ. Paul, one who lives his life for Christ. That is the secret. That is the ultimate source of joy. You, too, belong to Christ and you, too, can live your life for Christ. That is the source of joy.

Desmond Tutu, who knew the captivity of Apartheid, joined the Dalai Lama and together they wrote a book called “The Book of Joy.” Tutu said this, “Discovering more joy does not, I’m sorry to say... save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.”⁴

I think he is right. When we know that every day is lived for the God who lives for us, then when hardship comes, it does not make us hard, but compassionate. We remain fully alive.

I called my mom this week, just to check in. I asked her how’s she doing. She said, “Oh, love, I’m fine.”

In September of 1989 she suffered a stroke that left her disabled. She couldn’t work anymore, mostly because she has what the doctor’s call aphasia. It’s a brain injury to the speech center and you can’t

remember words. She was a preacher and that’s a big blow. It’s frustrating to know what you want to say but you have no vocabulary—like someone dropped you in Jordan and you don’t know a word of Arabic. When she wants a banana, she might ask you for a toothbrush. Or she might just say, “I want that thing.” It’s led to some challenging conversations over the years trying to interpret the message in the midst of the muddle. She knows who I am, but she hasn’t called me by my name since 1989. She just calls me “love.” That’s also how she addresses my sister, my wife and Brittany, the caregiver in the nursing home who takes care of all of us by taking care of her.

One word my mother has never lost is “fine.” “Mom, how are you?” “Oh, love, I’m fine.” To be locked up inside yourself for decades would make most folks bitter, but I watch her with amazement as she greets not every day, but many more days than not, content, calm. Quieted. “Mom, you doing okay?” “Oh, love, I’m fine.”

When Paul says he has learned the secret, I believe him because I have seen it in so many others, including my own mother. And the secret? It’s remembering who we are. You belong to God. Christ lived and died and was raised again for you. That is the love that defines every moment—in plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health.

Remember that and it will be a source of joy. It won’t always be easy. And it won’t make you happy all the time. But joy, yes, I promise.

4 Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy* (2016) p. 12.