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Sermon: June 26, 2016
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“LIFE TO US”
Philippians 1:18b-26

? What is life to you?

☑ Lately my heart has been bursting with gladness and gratitude. I have realized more completely, and felt more acutely, the depth of my love for Beth, AmyLynn, Hannah, and Emily. I cherish them above all people.

Not only so, my greatest impact on the world is mediated through them. My pastoral ministry is important, my life in the community is significant, but the difference I make as a husband and father is more profound.

The thought of losing my wife or any of my daughters makes me shudder. I cannot imagine more agonizing pain than that. It would rip a hole in my soul.

Still, they must not be life to me, nor I to them. We lack sufficient strength, knowledge, wisdom, goodness, and love to fill that role – not to mention, we are mortal.

With God’s help I can (in context) be the perfect husband and father, Beth the ideal wife and mother, each girl the model daughter and sister.

But to be each other’s source of *meaning*? To be *life* for one another? We are not up to that task.

A lot of us seek ultimate meaning in human relationship, or vocation, or money and possessions, or what have you. These things inevitably fail us. They do not – indeed, they cannot – give us life.

It is not that they are *worthless*. To the contrary, in their proper places and enjoyed in the right ways, they add substantial value to our lives.

But when we put them at the dead center of reality; when we attribute decisive import to them; when we invest our reason for being in them – then they are idols. And idols are worse than worthless!

? What is life to us? What is most essential? What makes our existence worthwhile?

☐ Please turn with me to Philippians 1:18b-26.

This letter is often called *The Epistle of Joy*. We are studying it through that lens.

■ In verse 18b the apostle Paul affirms, “**Yes, and I will continue to rejoice**”.

Now if anyone has reason to be gloomy, Paul does. Even so he writes, “**I will continue to rejoice.**”

● Let’s review what he has already taught us about joy. In verses 3-8 he rejoices in the Philippians’ “**partnership in the Gospel**”; in God’s “**good work**” to make them like Jesus; in their warm and caring relationship centered in the Lord; and in the ways they share God’s grace with him by providing for his needs.

● In verses 9-11 he takes joy in praying for their love to grow in quantity, maturity, and impact; for their conduct to be spiritually informed, morally excellent, and powered by love; for them to bear abundant spiritual fruit; and for them to bring “**glory and praise**” to the Trinity.

● {II Co 7:4} In verses 12-18a his “**joy knows no bounds**” even though he is in prison “**for Christ**” and jealous rivals are “[stirring] **up trouble**” for him in the

Church. His joy is boundless because he knows that the Almighty is utilizing these horrible circumstances and hostile adversaries **“to advance the Gospel.”** **“And because of this I rejoice”** (verse 18a).

{Heb 4:12; II Tim 3:16-17} How is this relevant to us? This **“Word... is alive and active.”** It **“is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so [that we] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”** These teachings about joy apply to us as much as to his original readers.

- That brings us to verse 18b: **“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.”** Then he explains how.

- Verses 19-20:

for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.
²⁰ **I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.**

At first hearing, we might assume that Paul is confident his prison term is coming to an end. We would be mistaken.

Surely, he wants that – but he has no firm *expectation* of it. Even if he did, the prospect of being spared further suffering is not his source of joy.

- In verse 19 Paul expresses certainty that God is using this hardship for his **“deliverance.”** And in verse 20 he defines **“deliverance”** as protection from shame.

- The shame he has in mind is not the indignity of imprisonment; it is the disgrace of dishonoring Christ Jesus to save his skin. Hence, in verse 20 Paul **“eagerly [expects] and [hopes]”** for enough **“courage”** that Messiah **“will be exalted in [his] body.”** His material situation is irrelevant in this, as we see in the phrase: **“whether by life or by death.”**

- ❓ How can the apostle **“continue to rejoice”**?

- ✎ He takes joy in exalting Jesus by all means, including participation in his suffering and death.

To natural ears that sounds crazy, does it not? We go to great lengths to avoid pain. Some take extreme measures to prolong bodily existence.

- ☆ But Paul has experienced a mind-blowing truth: glory is found in the cross of Christ. **“For we are [God’s] children ... heirs ... of God and co-heirs with Christ, if ... we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”** (Romans 8:17).

As Jesus says,

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves ... take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?” (Matthew 16:24-25).

- ★ The apostle put the honor of God ahead of his own comfort, liberty, and even physical survival. If we

want to “**continue to rejoice**” we, too, will prioritize God’s glory.

{Mt 22:38} This is consistent with the “**first and greatest commandment**”: “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**” Loving the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit best prompts us to glorify him above all.

■ In verses 22-26 Paul discusses another reason he “**will continue to rejoice.**”

²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

This is not a rhetorical flourish. The apostle is being sincere. He would prefer to go to heaven now.

{Php 1:13} And who can blame him? He is “**in chains for Christ,**” again. He has endured intense, nearly nonstop hardship of every sort. As I remarked last week, ever since Paul started following Messiah his path has been uphill all the way, with a burden on his back and a gale-force wind in his face.

Nevertheless, if he has any say in the matter he will keep walking down this hard, wearisome road. He will persist in denying himself, taking up his cross, and following Jesus all the way to Golgatha.

{Heb 12:2} Like the Son who “**For the joy set before him... endured the cross, scorning its shame,**” so this man of God is sacrificing security, relief, and reward.

? How can the apostle “**continue to rejoice**”?

✎ He takes joy in servicing the Lord God by servicing God’s people, even at the cost of continued suffering.

{Shakespeare} That’s weird! Individualism, relativism, and materialism have inflated our innate ego-centrism from a regrettable fact into a flaunted ideal. Our culture’s motto might as well be, “**To thine own self be true.**”

☆ But Paul has experienced a mind-blowing truth: his life is indivisibly knit together with those of every Christ Follower. “**Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ**” (II Corinthians 12:12).

As Jesus says, “**Whoever wants to become great ... must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many**” (Mt 20:26-28).

★ Paul put the Church’s need ahead of his personal comfort, liberty, and blessing. If we want to “**continue to rejoice**” we, too, will prioritize our neighbors’ good.

{Mt 22:39-40} This is consistent with the **“second”** **“commandment”** upon which, with the first, “[hangs] **all the Law and the Prophets**”: to **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** Loving others like this prompts costly deeds of service for their good.

By prioritizing God’s glory and neighbor’s good the apostle **“will continue to rejoice”** in spite of bad circumstances and nasty people. There is a word to us from the Holy Spirit through the apostle.

‡ We started by asking, what is life to us? What can we not live without? Well, how does that question connect with Philippians 1:18b-26?

As we have been discovering, the Christian joy embodied by Paul is multifaceted.

■ One crucial element is articulated in 1:21, which is a fulcrum between the sections before and after: **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”**

That is to say, {CEV} **“If I live, it will be for Christ, and if I die, I will gain even more.”** {NCV} **“To me the only important thing about living is Christ. And even death would be profit for me.”** {TEV} **“For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more.”**

To Paul, Jesus is life and life is Jesus. Christ is his source of meaning.

If Christ is our life, we will rejoice to prioritize God’s glory and neighbors’ good even in suffering!

If Christ is not the center of our life, the heart of our life, the substance of our lives – if he is only one part of it, an add on off to the side – you and I will not prioritize God’s

glory and neighbors’ good. And we will lack the fullness of joy even in the most favorable circumstances.

‡ What is life to us? May it be Christ Jesus!

Philippians 1:18-26 is the word of the Lord.