

February 19, 2017  
Philippians 4:8-13  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

### **“The Secret”**

**Good morning! It is a nice bonus to have a sunny 60 degree day in the middle of February when the theme of this Sunday is Joy. Although it certainly helps our spirits and our activities, I'll warn you before I even get started that I don't think joy depends on the weather. I think joy is a bigger topic than our circumstances on any given day.**

**I've chosen this text from Philippians 4 because it is a passage that makes me think of joy: not only because of what it says, but because of the associations I have with it at Creekside and elsewhere. It was the theme of Youth Sunday several years ago, Creekside did a series on Simple Gifts and used this passage -- I still have the bookmark with the open hands -- and it was part of the small group study on discipleship a year and a half ago. I still remember some of the people in my small group who shared how meaningful this scripture has been to them -- especially Philippians 4:13, which says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Tim and I recently got to visit with John Longenbaugh, who has a special association with that verse. I encourage you to ask him about it when you get a chance.**

**I'm not going to re-read the entire passage, partly because it should start back at verse 4 which says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" This is a command in the same sense as the word Praise which we talked about two weeks ago: All of you -- Rejoice! It is significant to remember the context of this letter from Paul to the church at Philippi; I know it's familiar to many of you. Paul is writing this letter from a Roman prison -- we're not sure exactly where. Prisons aren't generally known for their comfortable accommodations and tasty food. In fact, in Roman prisons, they didn't give you food at all. You had to have family or friends in the area who would bring**

food in for you, or you wouldn't get fed. The Romans didn't care if their prisoners starved. Paul is writing this letter to thank the Philippians for their help in the past, and also to remind them that they need to keep it up. This has been a familiar strategy for charitable giving for a long time: thank you for your support of our church in 2016, please remember us in 2017 so we can continue these great ministries. Only for Paul, this is pretty personal: he's starving. Or at very least, when he says he has learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need, he's not just speaking figuratively.

Being deprived of food and freedom might seem like a curious circumstance in which to proclaim gratitude and joy. But even when he was not in prison, Paul's life was far from easy: he traveled long distances, experienced shipwrecks and beatings, hostility and indifference to the gospel about which he was so passionate. We don't know how many churches he tried to plant which failed. We do gather from his letters that he was kind of funny-looking and didn't speak very well. Not exactly the pastor that every congregation dreams of. But Paul had learned a secret; the secret of being content with whatever he had. Maybe you know this secret -- maybe it isn't even a secret anymore, but it's what I want to focus on today, because this secret has a lot to do with joy.

I believe that joy is like a lot of other things which are good for us-- things like eating well, exercising, , prayer, saving for retirement, whatever. What these have in common is that they are not one-off events which happen to us when we're not expecting it. These are things we do on purpose, and they take discipline. Nobody I know wakes up one morning and decides out of the blue to run 5 miles and has the equipment and the conditioning to do so; but I know plenty of people who run 5 miles at a time. They get up regularly, run in all kinds of weather, and run even when they don't feel like it, and are not especially good at it. I am one of those people. It is not that one day when everything goes right and I feel great which makes me a runner, it is the accumulation of all those days when I do it anyway. Like any discipline we commit to, joy is an intentional choice, and in order for joy to shape us over time, it's a choice we have to make over and over and over again. Even on those days when we don't really feel like it. *Especially* on those days when don't really feel like it.

I know some of you have figured out the practice of joy, because I have experienced it. Last week I spent some time visiting people from Creekside. Not all these folks were in crisis, but generally I visit when I think people need support and encouragement. Here were some of the things I heard from you over the past week, "I feel so blessed to be able to help support my family," "I'm so glad I can give to my church," "How are *your* children doing?" "We're so fortunate it wasn't any worse" "We're so glad you came" There was no self-pity, no sense of "It's about time you got here." I can't tell you what a gift this is to a pastor, and what an indication it is of a deep and enduring practice of generosity and joy, even things are not perfect. I won't tell you who said each of these things, but I bet you know some of the people in our church family who embody joy. I believe that when joy is genuine, it finds expression in everything we do, in all circumstances -- even in the midst of grief and pain. Not everyone practices joy in the same way, but the results are similar, and folks know if you're faking it. Maybe you find joy in solitude, in the beauty of creation: but if you go out and take a long walk in the woods on a beautiful sunny February day and come home and yell at your wife and kick the dog -- you've missed the point. You can't love creation and hate the people whom God has created. That's like Linus from the comic strip Peanuts who said, "I love humanity: it's people I can't stand."

Worship Team has tried to provide some simple ways for you to spread joy. There are still a lot of PB&J note cards on the usher's table. I hope you'll consider picking up a few and spreading some joy around. There was a card in the McFadden's mailbox last week which said simply, "You're great!" It made my day. You don't have to write a note to me -- I bet you know other people who are great; this would be a good time to tell them. Maybe you don't express joy by writing notes of thanks and encouragement, that's OK. Maybe you don't express joy by being friendly or welcoming. Maybe you don't express joy through acts of generosity or service. But let me tell you this: if you think you're joyful, but you don't express that in any way; you're joyful in a secret way that no one ever sees -- you're not joyful. That is not the kind of secret Paul is talking about. Keeping gifts from God to yourself is not what good news is about. I grew up with a parent who believed that you could love your children without telling them

so. Maybe it's true that kids ought to just *know* you love them, because you hold down a job and put food on the table. What else do kids need? I assumed that my dad loved us because to assume otherwise would have been devastating, but I have come to believe that it was huge cop-out for him to not tell us so. Even if we had been rotten kids -- which we weren't -- we deserved to hear him say that he loved us.

Joy is something we offer to God, because God deserves it. Joy is also something we share with each other, because we need it. Every one of us. And here's the secret that Paul discovered: we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Christ is the source of all our joy -- not sunshine or Valentines or kittens or whatever makes you happy -- all fine things, but they're not the things that will do you much good when you're hungry and in prison. The strength that we have in Christ is not that Jesus will give us whatever it takes to make us happy -- our strength is that through Christ we can learn to be content whatever our circumstances. It is the strength that comes from acknowledging that life can be difficult: relationships disappoint us, our job disappoints us, our kids disappoint us, our parents disappoint us, the government disappoints us. The world can be a rough place. Being joyful doesn't mean being in denial about that reality. But if you're waiting to be joyful until everyone else measures up to your expectations, I'm here to tell you it could be a long wait. Our practice as Christians needs to be seeking joy whatever our circumstances. To rejoice in the Lord, always. And like any other practice, we get better at it when we do it regularly, when we seek joy and share it with others, whether we feel like it or not. When we do this for ourselves, there are great benefits to our attitude and outlook. When we seek joy as a community of faith, we are living into the mission of God, because we can't help but spread that joy to other people. People within our church family who need Christ's strength through our encouragement and support, and people outside of our church who will want to know the secret which we have discovered.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is the church's witness to the world that God is with us. Joy is our gift to one another when we need to share the strength of Jesus Christ. Joy is the Spirit with which should approach each day, whatever our circumstances. Joy is the secret

**that we ought to be sharing with everyone. Rejoice in the Lord, always.**

**Praise be to God, Blessings in Jesus' name, and may the joy of the Spirit be with you. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We're not going to sing it, but any of you can say if you want: if you're happy and you know it, say Amen: AMEN!**