

When Paul sounds like Pollyanna (Philippians 4:1-9)

## What does true joy require of us?

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Like most people, I don't like being told what to feel. Nothing brings out the curmudgeon in me like a catchy slogan about positivity: "Don't worry, be happy!" "Start your day with a smile!" "Happiness is a choice!"

So this week's epistle reading, chock-full of such cheery imperatives, is tough for me to take in. "Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul tells his friends in Philippi. "Again I will say, 'Rejoice.'" "Do not worry about anything. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." I don't know about you, but when I read these verses, my inner teenager rises up in rebellion. Snarky and superior, she frowns, rolls her eyes, and heads for the door.

On a more serious note, I know from growing up in the church that the exhortation to "rejoice always" can do serious harm when we elevate it over and above the insights of psychology. Telling someone who struggles with clinical depression to rejoice always is cruel. So is telling someone in the throes of a panic attack to just stop feeling anxious. Too often, Christians demand of each other a Pollyanna-ish cheerfulness that refuses to look the complexities of real life in the face. As if our faith—and, by extension, our God—is too fragile to handle life's dark side without a generous side serving of grinning emojis.

What's helping me as I contemplate Paul's advice is to remember that he wrote this letter from prison—while awaiting trial and anticipating a likely outcome of death. It also helps to remember that he was a man who was threatened, rejected, beaten,

and shipwrecked. A man with a "thorn in the flesh" that God apparently did not heal. A man whose haunted past included contempt, rage, and even violence. A man who knew firsthand the irony of a *Pax Romana* that left most people cringing under state-sponsored oppression.

Paul was no Pollyanna; he was a tried and tested realist.

So I wonder whether these famous verses from Philippians are not about feeling good so much as they are about cultivating the inner life of the soul. In Paul's view, peace and joy are not emotions we can conjure up within ourselves. They come from God, and the only way we can receive them is through consistent spiritual practice: prayer, supplication, gentleness, and contemplation.

In other words, joy requires us to sidestep sentimentality and cynicism alike. It requires that we hold onto two realities at once: the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand, and the reality of God's love in the other. Joy is what happens when we daily live into the belief that God can and will bridge the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes. It is a posture, an orientation, a practice. A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the "not yet," trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in that in-between place for as long as it takes.

This is joy at its most robust, its most powerful. There's no emoji in the world that can contain it.