

“Participating in Suffering and Joy”

Phil. 3:4b-14

As we continue our four week journey reading through Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we get to see what this “epistle of joy” is really all about. Paul very much wants his readers to be filled with encouragement and true joy – not the happy euphoria that we often equate with the concept of “joy.” Or even the Pollyanna happiness that, whatever hardships may come my way, I am just going to be happy and filled with optimism every single day. That was not Paul’s reality. That is no one’s reality. But rather, Paul is filled with relief, contentment in Christ – the lifting of burdens that we have no strength to lift on our own.

Today is a day to celebrate true joy, in Christ, and as I said last week, we are going to again talk about participation, fellowship, koinonia. Therefore, it is appropriate that we are taking time today to also celebrate the work of the LWML. There is joy, there is fellowship, there is participation in the ongoing actions of these faithful women.

So often, whenever a person is becoming involved in a group or fellowship – whenever you are going to “share with someone in something” – the definition of fellowship, the question that is almost always in the back of our sinful minds is, “What do I get out of it?” When first entering into the situation, this tends to be an unanswerable question. Ask a young couple what it will be like to be a father or a mother. They can’t tell

you. They think they know, but they don't know what that joy is like. Ask a person who is ridden with guilt what it is going to feel like when you are completely forgiven. They can't tell you, because they have not yet experienced it, and they don't expect to share in that joy.

Until you have koinonia (fellowship, participation in something) you will never know what it means to participate – to share in something with someone. This is true in most walks of life; it is certainly true of the work of the LWML.

A couple weeks ago, when we heard the parable of the workers in the vineyard, I said, “if you are a worker in the vineyard; whether you have been called late or were called early, it is not about you or what extra you will get out of it. We all get the same “pay” at the end of the day – the inheritance of the Kingdom of God. Which is an amazing and unexpected promise given that we know we do not at all deserve such a reward at the end of the day.

While on this earth and having been called to be a part of the body of Christ which is His Church, our calling is to work within His Church expecting nothing extra for the work which is done (then again, our inheritance is more than we should ever expect). But, there is great joy (earthly happiness) in the “extra” we do get. There is extra (earthly joy) in participating in the life of the church, but again it's not what you think.

As I said a couple weeks ago, it is the joy of serving; the joy of sacrificing your time for the benefit of someone who can't give back to you; the joy of sacrificial giving. That is the extra. And if you don't know what that feels like, I can't explain it to you. It is

something in which you simply need to participate. My experience with the ladies of the LWML is that they understand this kind of joy.

Paul speaks to the Philippians about participating (having koinonia). As we saw last week, this is the Holy Communion word from 1st Corinthians. Paul goes to great lengths to point out that his righteousness is a righteousness that is not his own. My works “I count as rubbish,” he says. The English does not do this verse justice because Paul is making a “manure” reference in a PG-13 kind of way. I count everything as “rubbish.” Luther would have used a less genteel word.

That is what even our best works look like in the mirror of the Law of God. What could you possibly hold before God and say, “Look, I have made everything better.” No, it is “rubbish,” it is “manure.” Paul is speaking more crudely. I am choosing to use the French euphemism.

Our life in Christ is not about participating in good, righteous deeds or our catalog of accomplishments. That is not why we celebrate the work of the LWML. Paul talks about his utter failure when he was living as a Pharisee of Pharisees. When we place any of our salvation on how “good” we are in regard to our works – how much strength we have, we end up in guilt and despair. I know how much of a sinner I am.

The point is: He is a loving God who is angry at sin. Sin had separated His children, the children of Adam; sin had separated you from Him. You and I were born without koinonia, without fellowship or participation with Him. We didn’t even have knowledge of

Him. He had to fix this and give us righteousness that we may know Him and the power of the resurrection.

If you want to understand the love of God and why, as His children, we find such joy in serving others, as is seen vividly in the work of the LWML – since we are recognizing them this day. We need look no further than what He did to bring about the reality of the resurrection of the dead. He sent His own Son to “become sin for us” so that God’s righteous anger at your sin would be directed at Jesus. You and I deserve death and hell. Jesus endured His Passion on the cross so that we can participate in His Passion, His suffering, and His resurrection.

Paul says our faith in Christ, our righteousness from God is all for one purpose, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection” because nothing else really matters – that is our source of joy, hope, and contentment. Then Paul explains the “why?” but also the “how” of the work of Christ. Paul says: “[That I] may share His sufferings.” “Share” is that *koinonia* word – have fellowship in, participate in.

We share in, participate in Christ’s “sufferings” – in His Passion. That’s what it says. Luther calls this the “Theology of the Cross.” We have talked about this quite a bit in our Wednesday Bible class. We have fellowship, communion with His Passion – not just participation in the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, but participation in His suffering, which our suffering in this life is a part of.

All of the joy and relief in this letter has, as its focus, the promise of what has been won for you by the Son of God on the cross. But also, Jesus is relief for your sins and

everything that weighs you down here and now. He has lifted the burdens that you have no strength to lift on your own.

If God can take the greatest of evils (the death of the Son of God) and turn it to the greatest of good, then how much more can he take the lesser evils which litter human history, from individual tragedies in your life, in your family, to international disasters half-way around the world, and turn them to His good purpose as well. We share in, participate in His suffering and death with the knowledge and confidence that we will also participate in His resurrection and joy. Amen.