

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 14, September 18, 2011, dedicated to Henry Taylor Walton, Joseph Matthew Walton and Hudson Kingsley Fleurant on their baptismal day, to the Gladden scholars, Jess Peacock, Abby Salak and Alexander Throckmorton, to Aubrey Smith as she guides 6,900 freshman into their new homes at OSU today, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“To Progress in Joy and Faith”**

***Philippians 1:21-30;  
Matthew 18:15-20***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock/our salvation. Amen.

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Some time back, I came across a letter of reference written to a church search committee. Knowing that the congregation was trying to find a new senior minister, the author of the letter described the man he believed would be the perfect candidate for their congregation. Although this man started his professional career mocking and persecuting Christians, he had experienced a major conversion and completely turned his life around. Now he was a pastor in the church. He was outgoing, genuinely loving, fearless in the face of public opposition, unbending in his belief that Jesus was his Lord and Savior. He could preach on any street corner or in any prison cell. No matter what obstacles have been placed in his path, this pastor has been able to overcome all

circumstances through his love of God and his faith in Christ.

The letter continued, *“You should know a few things about him. He has been imprisoned many times. But don’t hold that against him. His criminal record was only established because he had unjustly been stoned, beaten and jailed for his beliefs in Jesus.”* He had also moved around quite a bit. It might appear that he has a hard time holding down a job. But I encourage your search committee to focus on his track record because everywhere he has gone, churches have grown and flourished in numbers, spirit and faith.

As the letter of reference came to an end, two things entered the reader’s mind. First, the man being described sounds a lot like the apostle, Paul of Tarsus. Second, no search committee in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church would ever consider calling this candidate to lead their congregation. In the end, the letter of reference was simply signed, “Sincerely yours, Jesus of Nazareth.”

Author of one-third of the texts of the New Testament (although Paul’s authorship of some of these letters have been questioned through the years), Paul is indeed one of a kind as a pastor, missionary and man of faith. All of us would be wise to become well acquainted with this man.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson begins his reflections on Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

*“This is Paul’s happiest letter. And happiness is infectious. Before we’ve read a dozen lines (of this letter) we begin to feel the joy ourselves - the dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us. But happiness is not a word we can understand by looking it up in the dictionary. In fact, none of the qualities of the Christian life can be learned in a book”* (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, Co., 2003, p. 2133).

It is true. We cannot learn our faith from a book,

although I encourage all of you to read this book (the Bible). All of us need to be apprentices in the Christian life. Being around people who have devoted themselves to the disciplines of the Christian life, watching “the masters” of joy and faith at work is essential for us if we are to pick up the absolutely essential things of our walk in faith, such as timing and rhythm and the touch of a life well lived in Christ. To make progress in joy and faith we would be wise to watch, to listen, and to learn from perhaps the greatest master teacher - the Apostle Paul.

In this happy and joyful letter, Paul doesn't tell us that we can be happy. He doesn't tell us how to be happy. He is simply and unmistakably happy. Paul is writing from a jail cell in Rome. His pen is moving across papyrus in a place of suffering and pain with the stench and atmosphere of certain death. This is not a happy place. But Paul is happy.

Paul is tired and worn having been beaten, imprisoned, and scourged for the last 20 years. Throughout this time, he has been traveling and establishing churches throughout key cities of commerce and trade on the Mediterranean Sea. His message hasn't changed. He preaches and apprentices in his whole being the way and the fullness of love in Jesus Christ. He beams Christ's love. He wants all to know that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of each person and the entire world.

His work is under attack from other Christians and, of course, from the Roman Empire itself. He is an easy target because he is out in front of people trying to lead with a new language and new understandings of life lived in the fullness of God's love, Christ's grace, and the Holy Spirit's power and presence. These are not happy places or happy circumstances. Nor do they correspond with what is undeniably a hopeful spirit and voice.

Despite of all this, Paul's joy and faith are palpable. After introducing himself and Timothy, and a greeting of grace and peace to all the members, pastors and ministers in Philippi,

Paul writes:

*Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying to God with a glad heart . . . there has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the day that Christ Jesus appears. It is not all fanciful for me to think this way about you. My prayers and hopes are rooted in reality. . . . God knows how much I love you and miss you these days. . . . So, this is my prayer, that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but love well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not just a sentimental gush. Live a lover's life . . . a life Jesus would be proud of, bountiful is fruits from the soul, making Jesus attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God. (Selections from Philippians 1:1-11, from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, pp. 2134-2135).*

Do you feel the love of God, the joy of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit breathing out of the words and presence of our imprisoned master teacher and apostle, Paul? Do you feel the soaring sense of hope as Paul speaks to his faith-filled sisters and brothers in Philippi? His is undaunted courage. Paul is the embodiment of faith with an exclamation point and joy with an unending heart beat!

As we arrive at the end of chapter 1, Paul is reflective on living and dying in Christ. For Paul, to live in Christ, is to be given the opportunity to magnify his name. But to die - for Christ's sake - is to gain eternal life. Living or dying in Christ is equally blessed in Paul's understanding. Again, his joy is expressed in the fullness of faith - in life and in death.

Through close to 12 years as your pastor, I have been blessed by a host of men and women in this congregation who have lived to magnify Christ and died in his loving embrace, thus gaining his eternal glory. They have been daily witnesses

to a life well lived in Christ. Not one of them perfect, (as not one of us is perfect), they have been my inspiration and my hope. I have been blessed to apprentice in the workshop of their lives. For those who have been around, I trust you have learned from them as well. I trust you have learned to be integral in your life, honest in your dealings, faithful in your work and joyful in the Lord.

But consider this: Each of these beloved ones have been apprentices at the feet of master teachers in their generation. And each of their master teachers have been apprentices, too, going back generation after generation – going all the way back to a dark and dingy dungeon in Rome – where Paul first shared what he had learned as an apprentice to Christ himself.

Today, Hudson, Henry and Joseph have been baptized into Christ Jesus. They are already watching us! They are going to see if we are reflections of Christ's joy and faith. They want to know if you are worthy to be called followers of the one whom we claim to have our faith firmly planted in. They want to know if we are the real deal or just "make believe" believers. They want to know if we walk the talk or just talk and then walk away from the true calling to be disciples of Christ. They want to know if we know Christ personally or simply talk about him intellectually. Although we cannot only read about faith, we have to live it - may I recommend that we finish what we started with our friend and brother Paul. Paul wraps up his letter to the church at Philippi with these words:

*My brothers and sisters, you can be sure that God will take care of everything you need for God's generosity exceeds everything else in this world! ...And as you share our regards with every Christian you meet, may you receive and experience the amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, deep, deep within yourselves. (Paraphrase of Philippians 4:20-21, 23 from The Message, p. 2140). Amen.*