

# The Joy of Being Church 5: *Joy in the Book of Life*

By  
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

October 15, 2023  
150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Psalm 100

<sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. <sup>2</sup>Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. <sup>3</sup>Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. <sup>4</sup>Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. <sup>5</sup>For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

## Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup>I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. <sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Garret Keizer is a writer, who also serves as A lay minister for Christ Episcopal Church in Island Pond, Vermont. In his small town he has had the special job of winding the clock in his church's tower. He writes: "I am the town clock-winder. I have been so almost as long as I have been the lay vicar of its Episcopal Church. Twice a week, on Thursday and Sunday, I climb through the vertical tunnel inside the Carpenter Gothic spire of my church up to the little wooden house that holds the clockworks. With a key like an antique car crank, I wind two drums of steel cable, one for the time on the four faces and one for the great bell that rings the hours... Along with my ministry, this minor job has given me a focus for thinking about work, for thinking about faith, and time, and about the particular places to which individuals come and reckon with those things." Keizer then observes: "From a vantage point much higher than a pulpit, I have looked out from behind the clock faces at the railroad tracks far below, and wondered about my own coming and going, and about the community's history and future."<sup>1</sup>

Today's celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church invites all of us to that high perch of the clock-winder, to a vantage point of considering this congregation's history and future; to wonder about our own coming and going; to focus our thinking on work, faith and time and about this particular place where individuals have come to reckon with those things.

I have been thinking about the stories I've heard, the memories shared, the challenges faced, the bold acts of leadership and service through the years that have led this congregation into risky places of discipleship. Stories of pillars of this church now who remember as young girls hurling their Easter bonnets out the top windows of the Education building to watch them sail to the green lawn below. Stories of family members related to the architect who designed this grand sanctuary. Stories of bold and generous decisions – to send missionaries to India to found a hospital; of turning toward the city of Philadelphia as a place to engage partners in ministry among communities of need, of founding the Timothy School on this campus for children with

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<sup>1</sup> Garret Keizer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, p. 79 ff.

special needs. Stories of preachers remembered for their prophetic word amid times of turmoil, who led the congregation toward courageous action, as well as the many pastors remembered for performing family baptisms, marriages and Memorial Services for the saints. Stories of the children of one pastor who made beer in the third-floor bathtub of the manse I currently call home.

There are so many occasions to remember, but also countless aspects of this church's life so routine they simply merge into a general memory of gratitude for a place of extraordinary music, compassionate friends, visionary leaders, wonderfully faithful partners in mission. All stories of how this place has enabled people to reckon with work, faith and time.

Surely the reason those old saints from the early church kept Paul's Letter to the Philippians alive and passed it down to us is they recognized in it universal truths for the bold witness of the church. First of all, this letter acknowledges the difficult circumstances every Christian congregation faces as a community of God's love and grace in a broken and sinful world. In every age, the church has faced opposition from the outside – in Paul's day - persecution, military occupation, economic disparity, political violence and injustice, all counter to the reign of God. Today, we would count as opposition the secular but not religious, scorn and disillusionment – all those markers of church decline we hear about these days. The church has always raised the cross in a hostile and apathetic world.

The second, and related, universal topic of this letter is the acknowledgement that churches are diverse communities of believers where folks do not think alike, and who must struggle to discern the unity Christ intends. In today's reading two women, leaders of the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, are in a dispute over something. Paul calls them out! He reminds the whole congregation of their responsibility to work together as the saints whose names are recorded in the Book of Life.

The reference to *the Book of Life* takes us back to the Exodus, when Moses was mediating a dispute between the ancient Israelites and God.<sup>2</sup> The Book of Life, contains the names of all the people, who through the years have entered a covenant with God, have rebelled and sinned, who have been forgiven and sent forth again to do the redemptive work of God in the world. As one biblical scholar put it, from our forebears “the church learns how to be a people of God, which involves settling disputes, finding joy in one’s relationship with God; avoiding unnecessary worry, being engaged in active prayer, and living a life of virtue that has gentleness as its cornerstone. The reward for living this type of life,” notes the scholar, “IS the peace of God.”<sup>3</sup> Paul says that – united in community with one another *the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

How desperately we need that peace – right now - how the world needs the church to be instruments of that peace. Our hearts and minds have been fixated on the Hamas terrorist assault on innocent people in Israel: soul wrenching, horrific, calculated brutality, murder, massacre, absolute evil. And also, on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The killing of innocents should not be met with the killing of innocents. We have to call it out and condemn the violence as counter to the purposes of God. We are also reminded of Paul’s words elsewhere, “see that none of you repays evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and to all.”<sup>4</sup> No human person should live in such fear, or in hunger, or under a constant cloud of violence. As we survey the overwhelmingly complicated conflict in Israel, Gaza and Palestine, we are called – by this holy script – to let our gentleness be known and lean into the peace of Christ which surpasses our understanding. We must pray and act, in the words of a Jewish mother I heard whose children were taken hostage, “We just want peace, we have to work for peace.”

Listen to what Paul means exactly when he writes the *peace of Christ will guard* you. Paul is using the most forceful, most evocative, most promising definition of *peace* we can imagine. In a striking paradox, Paul describes this

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Dempsey, *Connections*, Year A, vol. 3, p. 382

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation series, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:15.

peace with a military term. The peace of God will guard, it means “will stand sentry watch” over your hearts and minds. Because Christ is near, God’s peace is on duty. Under military occupation, the Romans can drag Paul into prison and throw away the key, but God’s peace stands guard. The church can likewise stand firm, condemn evil for what it is, trust God is near, and join in God’s work of redemption and peacemaking in a hostile world. Because God’s peace is on duty, Paul says, we must not be anxious, but rather alert. Alert to the threats with truth-telling, gentleness, justice. *Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen, and the God of peace will be with you.*

On a weekend like this it is easy to get nostalgic about the church that used to be – but that’s not the church we are called by God to be. Today, the peace of God “stands sentry watch” over our hearts and minds. Because Christ is near, God’s peace is on duty and it has become our work, our faith, our time to take God’s peace into every corner of the world that is starving for it. The work of this church is not done. Our work is never done until God’s reign of peace prevails.

Kate Bowler is professor of the History of Christianity at Duke Divinity School. Following a diagnosis of Stage 4 cancer at the age of 35, she writes movingly about what she calls “our beautiful, terrible finitude.”<sup>5</sup> She has a chapter entitled “Unfinished Cathedrals,” in which she tells a family story of visiting an old monastery just inland from Lisbon, Portugal. She found her father, arms crossed, shaking his head at an archway leading into a Chapel lavishly covered with stone faces, flowers and pineapples. “Thousands of tiny sculptures crowded every square inch of stone, an obvious example of late Gothic architecture known for adding doodly-dads to everything. “It looks like an explosion,” she says to her father as they laugh at its excesses.

But an elderly man, binoculars bouncing off his chest walks up and says, “Ohhhh, it is absolutely *perfect*.” Just then a massive shadow passes over the floor and, alarmed, they look up to see the sky through a roof that was never

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<sup>5</sup> Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human*, p. 194 ff.

completed. Their new companion, better informed than they, says, “It was never finished, dear, isn’t it wonderful? He gestured up to the sky through where the ceiling should have been and told them seven kings had seen the rise of this monument and had buried their dynasty within its walls, but no one lived to finish it.” “But it’s much better this way,” said the man. “What do you mean?” Kate asked. “Don’t you see? It’s us. I cannot imagine a more perfect expression of this life. “I came all this way to see it. We’re never done, dear. Even when we’re done, we’re never done.”

Kate Bowler reflects on that Unfinished Cathedral, both the laughter with her father and the earnest appreciation of a traveling stranger. “All our striving, all our work, unfinished, unfinishable. We do too much, never enough, and are done before we started. All of us are *Unfinished Cathedrals*. It’s better that way.”

Friends, our forebears here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church left unfinished work for us to do. They left us an Unfinished Cathedral. Through their commitments, their quarrels, their vision, their brave proclamation of God’s peace, their bold service in communities of extraordinary need – through the remarkable, commendable moments and through the ordinary, often forgettable acts of gentleness, they left us an Unfinished Cathedral. Their names, according to Paul, are written in the Book of Life. So are ours! Their charge is our charge in these fraught and violent days: <sup>4</sup>*Rejoice in the Lord always;* <sup>5</sup>*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* <sup>9</sup>*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen, and the God of peace will be with you. Always.*

AMEN.