

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 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.

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. 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.

“Rejoice in the Lord, always. And again I say rejoice.” Philippians is by far Paul’s most joyful letter. The word ‘rejoice’ occurs 8 times in only 4 short chapters. And what’s interesting about this is you might think Paul wrote this letter early on, when he was footloose and fancy free- just traveling around the Mediterranean planting churches like some kind of first century Johnny Appleseed. That’s when you would think someone would be feeling like rejoicing.

But actually, it’s just the opposite. This, the most joyful of all Paul’s letters, wasn’t written while he was on the road with the sea breeze blowing through his hair- it was written while he was in jail. It was written while he was rotting in a Roman jail and facing the death penalty.

“Rejoice in the Lord, always. And again I say, rejoice.” It’s not exactly what you would expect from someone on death row, is it? It’s not exactly the attitude you think

you'd find. Yet somehow, Paul figures out how to be free, how to live with joy, even when his freedom had been taken away.

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No small thing, this. Knowing how to be free no matter what's been taken away from you. No small thing at all, since everyone of us at some point in our lives, everyone of us knows, or will know, what it is to lose our freedom in some way.

Now for Paul imprisonment is concrete- he is sitting in a literal jail. And some of you have known what that's like. But for others our prisons are more figurative- you feel trapped in a family, relationship, or a job that is just eating away at you, but as trapped as you feel you can't figure out quite how to leave either.

And, even though we don't like to think about it- each of us will experience our own bodies, our own minds, begin to fail on us. The things we love to do now, the people we know ourselves to be now- well we just weren't really built to last forever. One preacher I love, Barbara Lundblad, likes to say the world isn't divided by the able bodied and the disabled- it's divided by the temporarily able bodied and the disabled. No one is really able bodied for long, she reminds us- every single one of us is, at best, only temporarily able bodied. And that means at some point we will all know, if we don't already, what it is to lose some of our freedom- our freedom to move as we'd like, our freedom to think as clearly as we'd like.

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Dr. Oliver Sacks is an English neurologist who practices medicine in New York City. More than most people he has studied and cared for people who have lost some of this freedom- people whose bodies have become a kind of prison. One of the most fascinating cases he describes was a man he calls Mr. P.

Mr. P was a professional musician. A vocalist famous for his singing in his early life, he became even more famous as a teacher in his later years. But strange things began to happen. He began to have difficulty recognizing the faces of his students. By this, I don't mean that he just couldn't put a name with a face- I mean he wasn't able to recognize the student at all until they spoke or sang. Then, as soon as he heard their voice, their music, he would immediately know them and call out their name.

And it wasn't just that he wasn't recognizing faces of people he should know- he was also seeing faces where there weren't any faces to be seen. He became famous for stopping by fire hydrants, for instance, and patting them on the top and talking to them as if they were little children.

At first people thought he was just being funny. He was still a great teacher, and Mr. P was famous for a quirky sense of humor. But then, when he lost the ability to recognize even his wife's face- his family knew that something terrible had gone wrong.

When Dr. Sacks first examined Mr. P, he almost thought it might have been some kind of joke. The man passed every eye exam and the basic neurological exam- reflexes, muscle strength, coordination, basic mental function. Everything checked out. And Mr. P was so charming, so accomplished. Surely there had been some kind of mistake. Then,

as Dr. Sacks announced they were done with the tests, Mr. P, looking very pleased with himself started to search for his hat so he could leave. And to Sack's astonishment Mr. P grabbed the top of his wife's head and pulled. And when his "hat" didn't lift up, he used both hands and pulled again- hard. In frustration he complained to Dr. Sacks that his hat was stuck on something and would he mind giving him a hand. Mr. P's wife just stared at Dr. Sacks as if to say, "See?"

It turns out this man suffered from a profound kind of prosopagnosia, or face blindness- only he wound up becoming blind to many other everyday objects like gloves and flowers as well. Sadly, while Dr. Sacks was able to diagnose the poor man, the problem was that a part of his brain had degenerated and would likely continue to do so. There was nothing anyone would be able to do to fix the problem. The best anyone could do would be to help the man cope with it as best as they could.

This beautiful man. This beautiful artist and musician. He had become blind to his own wife's face. Could any jail cell be darker or more confining?

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Now, Paul, finding himself in an ancient Roman jail, think Mexican prison only without the luxury, Paul in his literal jail cell somehow finds a way not merely to get by, but to rejoice. To rejoice? How?

I'll admit that there's a part of me that wonders when I read Philippians if it's just a front- an act Paul puts on to sound more cheerful than he is. But most of me believes him. Most of me believes him- if only because he is so honest in the rest of his letters. In

Romans he talks about his own brokenness, the thing I want to do I don't do, and the thing I hate- that's the thing I do, wretched man that I am. In Galatians we said a few weeks ago he says he wishes the church consultants visiting them would castrate themselves. I mean Paul is not known for sugar coating things. He's known for telling the truth- whether it's truth people want to hear or not.

And so, I'm inclined to believe him. And I think the key to this gift of his, this ability to rejoice even in prison- I think the key lies in the verses we heard a little earlier. Especially the verse: *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, 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.*

See, here Paul is, rotting in a Roman jail. The prison controls nearly every part of his life. It controls where gets to be- when he wakes up in the morning and when he goes to sleep. It controls when, or if, he gets to eat and what he eats. It decides what he will wear. It decides whether he will be comfortable or whether he will be in pain. The prison controls every aspect of his life except for one thing- what he will think about. They can control every other part of his life- but they can't control what he will think about and believe.

And his choice- rather than dwelling on what he can't control, on all that he's lost; he decides instead to think on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, excellent, and worthy of praise.

And he's not crazy- he's not some kind of Pollyanna pretending that the prison he's in is some kind of blessing when it's not. He doesn't try to pretend that he's happy about being in prison- it's just that rather than dwell on what is awful, he wants to spend his time lifting up what is beautiful instead. In his case even when he can't lift anything up for praise around him- he thinks instead to this community in Philippi, this little church that, while not perfect, is beautiful; this little church that has cared for one another and for him even when it wasn't easy to do so. And so in the face of just absolute ugliness, brutal ugliness, Paul doesn't focus on that- he focuses on this small, beautiful church and writes his most joyful, most encouraging letter in what has to be the hardest time in his life.

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Eventually Mr. P asks Dr. Sacks what, exactly, was wrong with him and what can be done to fix it. And of course Dr. Sacks gives him his diagnoses. He's honest. But the way he gives it- well it goes above and beyond the call. Dr. Sacks tells the man that it wasn't as important to talk about what was wrong with him as it was to talk about what's right. He says, "I [don't want] to talk about what I find wrong. I want to say what I find right. You are a wonderful musician, and music is your life. What I would prescribe, in a case such as yours, is a life which consists entirely of music. Music has been the center- now make it the whole of your life." (Sacks, Oliver: The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, p. 18)

And indeed for Mr. P, Sack's hunch is spot on. While Mr. P's abilities to recognize the world around him continued to deteriorate, his musical sense never did.

And what kept him functioning, able to put on his clothes, able to eat, able to live a fairly normal life was music. He developed songs for every activity in his day. He had dressing songs, eating clothes, bathing songs, songs for everything. His wife said if his song is ever interrupted that he just stops, comes to a complete halt, and is unable to recognize anything around him. But when he's able to remember the music and hear it again- he's able to find himself again and keep going.

His body, his brain, they took away so much from- but they never took away his ability to sing. And by singing, by making use of what he had left, he found a way to be free.

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How about you? I know there's so much that's not going well in the world- so much that's not going well in your lives. I know. But, without denying that. Without pretending any of that away- I wonder what else might be taking place around us that we don't always give as much attention to? What is there around us that's true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, excellent, or worthy of praise? Seeing these things, really seeing them- it doesn't make the rest go away. It doesn't fix what's wrong. But sometimes, just seeing and knowing one thing, one person that's true or honorable in your life- sometimes this can be enough, this can enough to seal upon us the peace of Christ- the peace that passes all understanding.

It's easy to see what's wrong out there. What's going right? **Amen.**