

ALWAYS?
Habakkuk 3:17-19, Philippians 4:1-9
October 26, 2008

Earlier this month a significant 100th anniversary was marked. On October 14, 1908, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series by defeating the Detroit Tigers. The score was 2-0 in the fifth and final game of the series. This was their second World Championship in a row. It was also their last.

For 100 years, the Cubs have been in a World Series drought. Our country has changed radically over the past century, but the failure of the Cubs to win a championship has been a depressing constant in American life. When they last won, Henry Ford was producing his first Model T. Orville Wright was demonstrating his flying machine to the U.S. Army. The First World War was still years away.

The Cubs have suffered the longest dry spell between championships in modern sports history. No one else in Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Hockey League or the National Basketball Association comes close. In fact, the other three major sports leagues were not even in existence when the Cubs last won the World Series!

And yet, despite this long drought, Chicago fans remain faithful. They rejoice in the Cubs always.ⁱ

This is the kind of persistent faithfulness Paul is encouraging from the Christians of Philippi. In spite of their hardships, “Rejoice in the Lord always!” We want to question, “Do you really mean *always*, Paul?” Even when our nation is at war with dozens of military troops being killed or injured every month? Rejoice *always*? Even when our national and global economy is in a tailspin and even the experts don’t know how it will all play out? Rejoice *always*? How in the world do you expect us to rejoice even in the face of such calamities?

Paul knows that his admonition to “Rejoice in the Lord always” is indeed possible, for he is living it even in a most difficult situation. He is writing this letter to the church at Philippi from prison. Paul is a traveling missionary spreading the good news of God’s love expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. His is not an easy life. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he enumerates his suffering as a result of his ministry: repeated imprisonments; “countless floggings,” often near death; beaten five times by Jews with the forty lashes less one (so as not to violate the law by going over through miscounting); three times beaten by Roman authorities with rods; stoned once and left for dead; shipwrecked three times, including a night and a day adrift on planks; once lowered over the city wall in a basket to escape the governor’s wrath (2 Cor. 11:23-33).

In spite of all of these experiences, Paul offers several affirmations throughout his letter to the Philippians. “I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of being squelched, the Message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else too, found out that I’m in jail because of this Messiah. That piqued their curiosity, and now they’ve learned all about him. Not only that, but most of the Christians here have become far more sure of themselves in the faith than ever, speaking out fearlessly about God, about the Messiah” (1:12-14 *The Message*). After reciting his resume of status, pedigree, and accomplishment, Paul writes, “Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant”(3:8 *The Message*). The value of knowing Jesus Christ is far greater than the value of any position, rank,

or class. He is happy to give up all the things that society values for the joy of having faith in Christ. This faithful relationship with Jesus Christ enables him to stand firm in the face of persecution. His faith enables him to rejoice always. His faith overcomes his anxiety. Through faith he knows the peace of God.

Paul's witness is that with faith, we can find reason to rejoice always. He has some important words for us as we are living in these anxious and uncertain times. Paul encourages us to have the right mindset or perspective or belief system. The framework through which we view life has a powerful influence on how we see events, interpret experiences, and feel in response to events.

Consider the manager who has a job review which is basically a good review, but not perfect. Who is perfect? He finds himself focusing on the few suggestions for improvement and questions his performance, becoming increasingly anxious and depressed. Ultimately he "catastrophizes" the review to the point where he imagines that he will lose his job.

When the manager steps back to look objectively at his belief system, he realizes that he has a need to be seen as perfect and to not make mistakes. He also believes that if he does not perform in an exceptional manner, he is worthless. This belief system leads him to interpret his performance review in a manner that leaves him extremely anxious.

I had a health scare recently. My right knee began to ache during my morning walk a few weeks ago. By mid-morning I could hardly move to walk. As I shared this with others, they asked about my family history. I recalled that my mother had rheumatoid arthritis, and I began to imagine how my life would change if that was my diagnosis. I took some anti-inflammatory medicine for two weeks, and then, as suggested by the instructions on the bottle, I called the doctor. The doctor explained that the presenting symptoms for rheumatoid arthritis usually start in small joints, not large ones like the knee. Once I had that assurance, the pain subsided. It hasn't disappeared, but my mindset has changed. While I catastrophized about having a major ailment, my anxiety fed the pain. Once I had a realistic assessment of the situation, my anxiety diminished and the pain decreased. I can live with a minor ache. I can walk and function as I have been. I can rejoice, even in the midst of the pain that is a normal part of aging.

Our belief systems have tremendous power to influence how we interpret events, which in turn influence how we feel. Anxiety and worry result from our interpretation of events and life around us. Paul, in the Philippians passage, is attempting to challenge our belief systems. Rather than simplistically telling us not to worry or be anxious, he is asking us to shift our belief systems. Instead of believing that we need to be in control of everything, thereby becoming anxious with worry that we aren't in charge, Paul invites us to acknowledge our dependence on the fact that God is in control.

The twelve step recovery moment begins by acknowledging that we are not in control, in fact that we are powerless, and we are dependent upon a higher power. Only when we have learned to relinquish control and acknowledge our dependence on God can we begin to worry less about the events around us. Acknowledging his dependence on God allows Paul to proclaim his contentment even in prison. He is able to rejoice always because he places his trust not in his own power, but in the power of Almighty God.

Paul goes on to offer wisdom about focusing our attention and thoughts in ways that reduce anxiety. He says, "You'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse" (4:8). By shifting our belief system to seek out the good and the positive, we will find our anxiety and worry decreased.

I don't pretend to understand the economic crisis facing our nation. I do understand that part of it involves an abuse of credit. Something, money, is entrusted to another with the belief that it will be paid back. The word credit has the same root as the word creed: *credere*, to believe, to trust, entrust. One definition of creed is a set of fundamental beliefs, a guiding principle.

It seems that this is an appropriate time for us to examine our fundamental beliefs on multiple levels. Is our primary trust placed in money and the stock market or in the Source of all Life? To believe is to give one's heart to something or someone. Do we believe, give our heart more deeply to our material welfare or to our spiritual well-being? Do we really trust God deeply enough to uphold us as systems around us seem to be failing? If not, we are likely to become anxious because that in which we've placed more trust is being shown fallible.

Paul encourages us to focus our minds on those things which are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. We don't have to look far to find these things. As we immerse ourselves in the community of faith, we see them all around us. This past week as we have hosted the Winter Nights Shelter at St. Anselm's Church, I have witnessed your compassion, generosity, warmth, hospitality, and grace. I have seen children, youth, and adults offering not simply warm meals, but friendship and companionship to those walking through difficult seasons in their lives. You have indeed focused your minds on things that are honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. In expressing the love of Christ, others have been welcomed by the Christian community and our common life together has grown deeper.

It has been a reminder that our faith is not nurtured in isolation. We need the Christian community to stoke the flames of faith and keep the fire burning, especially in difficult times. Here in community we are reminded of the peace of God which is beyond our own understanding. Here we receive the gentle touch of one another, encouraging us to hold fast even in times of adversity.

I trust that many of you have had the opportunity to see the giant Sequoia trees of our state. They tower as high as 300 feet above ground. Yet it is a rare thing to see a redwood standing alone. The giant trees have shallow root systems that do not extend deep into the earth, as most tree roots do; they snake along just beneath the surface of the soil, reaching out in all directions to capture the greatest amount of surface moisture. These majestic trees cannot stand alone because a strong wind would quickly uproot a single tree. They grow in clusters and their roots intertwine with those of other trees, forming a great interwoven mass of support. They can withstand the fierce winter storms of the Sierra Nevada because they stand firm and strong together in community.ⁱⁱ

In the face of the current uncertainty we face about our personal and our corporate financial futures, we can find reason to follow Paul's admonition, "Rejoice in the Lord always." While we may be tempted to doubt, and ask, "*always?*" we can rejoice in all things when we see them from the perspective of our faith. Faith trumps anxiety and yields the peace of God. We declare that our credo is in God, who will see us through whatever the future holds. We are strengthened by the community of faith, with whom we declare, "Rejoice in the Lord always!"

ⁱ *Homiletics*, October 2008, pp. 48-49.

ⁱⁱ *Homiletics*, October 2008, p. 72.