

“The Best Years of Your Life”
Philippians 4:4-7
Andrew Foster Connors
3rd Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2009

There are some pieces of advice that stick with you whether you want them to or not. One piece that has stuck with Kate and me was given to us when we were in a particularly low place as new parents. Exhausted for lack of sleep, and the sands that shift in every relationship when children arrive, a more seasoned mother said to us, “Remember, these are the best years of your life.” We sloughed off her comment at the time, thinking this woman had perhaps forgotten the strains of those initial months, or that perhaps her children had been those sorts of angelic infant sleepers that we now dreamed about.

Her advice became a kind of cruel joke that we would pull on each other in the middle of the worst of parenthood. As I stumbled to retrieve our screaming child from her crib at 3 or 4 in the morning, I would hear Kate’s weary voice say just before she rolled over and went back to sleep, “Remember, these are the best years of your life.” Or, as I walked out the door to work leaving her hands in the remnants of an explosive diaper I’d say to her, “Goodbye, love. Remember, these are the best years of your life.”

Paul’s words to the church at Philippi struck me the same way this week. Responding to the struggles of a congregation of Jesus’ followers, Paul tells the people to “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Though we don’t know the details, it’s clear that like many congregations, the church at Philippi struggled with how to navigate conflict. Paul says as much even urging a couple of members of the body to “be of the same mind” –the congregation must have had their fair share of arguments.

In this midst of this conflict, Paul urges them to rejoice. Imagine writing to a community that’s experiencing the effects of economic distress and telling them to rejoice. Imagine writing to a friend who’s lost a job, or lost someone they love and telling them to rejoice. Imagine telling a nation weary from war or a planet weary from exploitation, rejoice, and again I say rejoice.

It’s not the kinds of words I would expect given the situation. I would expect Paul to take the disagreements in the community more seriously, to recognize that these are matters that take deliberate thought, grave action. That is what we would expect in response to serious situation. When a community is beaten down by the economic climate, we expect a solemn and serious response. When you experience the death of a loved one you expect a somber and heartfelt response. To the serious life-threatening issue of the abuse of creation, we expect sober thoughtful, serious action. We do not expect to be told “rejoice!”

It’s hard to imagine how Paul could feel like rejoicing either. Paul wrote this letter from prison. He had every reason to cry out and to lash out. I can imagine a more tempting response: “You people think you’ve got it bad. Trying staying in a Roman prison. If anyone’s got something to complain about it’s me!”

We don't know how the Philippians reacted. Perhaps they felt his advice signaled that he was not taking their real struggles seriously. Perhaps they mistook his call to rejoice for aloof optimism. Perhaps they imagined that Paul's time in prison had left him in a state of denial unable or unwilling to acknowledge just how bad things really are for him and for them, just how hard life is in a first-century Roman colony. Or perhaps they decided to give Paul's refrain a try, to take his counsel and try it out, to practice rejoicing even in trying circumstances.

As we practiced our own refrain in those early weeks of parenthood, the first few times weren't very helpful to either of us. I don't recall exactly what I said to Kate in the middle of night after hearing "remember, these are the best years of your life," - probably something I couldn't repeat here. And I can only imagine what sorts of volleys Kate might have lobbed my way as I departed for work, her hands deep in the messy work of parenthood.

But as the refrain became more practiced between us, the trying circumstances that evoked its usage sometimes seemed more tolerable, even fun. I remember in particular one Christmas Eve night, collapsing into bed in the wee hours of the morning after the last preparations had been made. It would have been easy to snip at each other with the circumstances the way that they were. Kate turned and said, "Remember these are the best years of your life." And we both erupted in a delirious fit of laughter that left us in some bizarre way knowing that this is indeed true.

I get the sense from Paul's rejoicing directive that if we want to stay whole, we do well to pay attention to our blessings and nurture our awareness of them, rather than always spending our energies on what is missing. This isn't the same thing as looking at the glass half full instead of half empty. With the shopping malls doing everything they can to force a happy smile on our faces, I don't think Paul is trying to do the same. Paying attention to our blessings is not the same thing as ignoring personal pain, hoping that by looking on the sunny side of life things will cheer up. It's not refusing to acknowledge pain or heartache or hurt; it's practicing an awareness of the blessings that visit us each day. Sometimes that awareness is best discerned within community.

We've been practicing that kind of awareness on Wednesday nights in a session on gratitude. One of our assignments has been to practice a simplified version of the examen - a spiritual practice pioneered by St. Ignatius with the aim of looking for the presence of the Holy within our daily living. Each day we have been asked to write down our God moments - time when we felt energy flowing into us, times for which we were grateful. We write those other moments, too, our least grateful moments, or times when we felt drained. Throughout Advent my family has added this practice to our nightly dinner routine. We light the advent candles, and share moments for which we were most grateful that day and moments for which we were least grateful. Wednesday night was led by Emily. She shared an insight the following day that was particularly helpful. I thank her for permission to share it. She said that on Wednesday as we shared aloud one thing for which we were grateful that day, she had a hard time coming up with one. But as the group began to share things for which they were grateful that day, moments and times when she had experienced God's grace began to spring up for her. By the end of the sharing she was palpably aware of blessing after blessing all in that one day.

The experience reminded me of the prayer that observant Jews sometimes pray on the Sabbath: “Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.” For Paul, the miracle was that the Lord is near. Not necessarily near in the sense of time, but spatially near. The Lord is close by – available - blessing, and healing, and creating right under our noses. And if the Lord is near, then we need not worry – there is every reason to rejoice.

With the end of the year coming quickly to a close, I realize how often I have failed to see the miracles that are present in this place. How many times I have worried over a budget, or fretted over a decision, or critiqued the places where we could be doing better all the while missing what a blessing it is to be in a church that isn’t on the verge a death. What a blessing it is to be a church that has managed to hold its own and then some in a horrible economy. What a blessing it is to be in a church that welcomes young and old, gay and straight, disabled and diverse of many shades of diversity. What a blessing it is to be in a community of people who pray for the sick and then applaud them when they come back to us from their isolation. What a blessing it is to be with people who yearn together for a fairer world, a better faith, for justice and for peace. What a blessing it is to have a place to come to weep when you need to weep, or laugh when you need to laugh, or celebrate when the time is right.

And those blessings don’t end here in this community. What a blessing it is to be in Baltimore – filled with culture and diversity – where a perfect stranger can call you “hon,” and you can decide to be one. What a blessing to be in a place that needs your gifts, that needs your wisdom, that needs your contributions. What a blessing to be on this earth – to feel the expanse of the ocean touching toes. To breathe in the smells of the forest taking our waste and turning it into new life. To watch the colors dance across the sky as our spot on the earth turns in for the night.

Rejoice! And again I say, rejoice – not the words I would expect to hear at a time when wars are raging, when the earth suffers disaster of our making, when the stress of this particular Christmas is real and palpable. Not the sorts of words I would offer in the face of real struggle and real pain. And yet the Lord is near - available - blessing, and healing, and creating right under our noses. The Lord is near in shared bread, common prayers, in laughter, community and embrace. The Lord is near in years that could be the best of our lives. The Lord is near, and we have every reason to rejoice.