

## Philippians 4:4-7

According to our Declaration of Independence, from 1776, we are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” You are alive. You live in a free country. Are you happy? Our Declaration tells us that happiness is a pursuit. We strive for it. It is that which we seek throughout our life. But happiness is fleeting. We can pursue it and find it one day, but then we lose it in a single moment. And it is purely subjective. That which makes one person happy will do nothing for someone else. A wife is having a happy day when she is out shopping, but her husband is far from happy as he sits on a bench at the mall waiting for her to finish.

The word *happy* occurs a mere two dozen times in the Bible. But the words *joy* and *rejoice* occur over five hundred times. St. Paul does not say, “Be happy in the Lord always; again I will say, be happy.” He says: “*Rejoice in the Lord always.*” You can be having the worst day of your life. Being happy is the farthest thing from your mind. But you can still have joy.

St. Paul should know. He writes these words while sitting in a prison cell. He is unable to come and go as he wants. He is kept from seeing those he loves. Sunshine, moonlight, and twinkling stars are a mere memory for him now. Hardly a recipe for happiness. And yet, he writes of joy.

You may, or may not, be happy at this moment in your life. Happiness, after all, is a choice. We are about as happy as we choose to be. Everyone can be happy. And it’s the rare person who is not happy when life is smiling on him or her. Did we sleep well or not? Are we healthy or sick? Do we have plenty of money or not? Do family and friends love us, or are they upset with us? These and other outside circumstances determine the level of our happiness. It takes great character to decide to be happy even when every outside circumstance is against us.

Joy, however, is not a choice; it’s a gift...from God. St. Paul does not say, “Rejoice...again I will say, rejoice.” He says, “*Rejoice in the Lord.*” The Lord is the source of our joy. Without the Lord, and apart from Him, people can be happy, but they cannot have joy.

Later in our Epistle text Paul speaks of peace. And like joy, peace is a gift. Not peace as the world gives, which can come and go. “*The peace of God,*” Paul says. Joy and peace are siblings. They are born of the same mother - that mother which gave birth to you in your Baptism - your mother, the church. You are not just baptized; you are baptized in Christ; just as you rejoice “in the Lord,” and as the “peace of God...guards your heart.” It’s all gift, not choice. God gives Baptism to you in Christ. He gives you joy in the Lord. And He guards your heart with His peace. And because it is a gift, it is yours no matter how life is treating you. In fact, as strange as this may seem, the darker our life becomes, the greater our joy. Not our happiness; our joy.

Paul’s life was very dark in prison. Layer after layer of brightness had been peeled away. Day by day, month by month, year after year, Paul’s darkness increased. But so, too, his joy. In a room that is brightly lit, a flicker of a match is hardly noticed. But as the light dims and the room becomes darker, that flicker of light becomes more and more visible.

Jesus is that flicker of light. I think it is true that you and I often go through life hardly aware of Him. This is not to our credit. It is to our shame. We do not look to Him as we should. We let

His Word lie by itself. We focus, not on Christ our true Light, but on the light of the world around us. Oh, we're happy as a result. When our world is bright and sunny, our happiness increases. But God may take such worldly light away. And when layer after layer of brightness becomes darkness for us, our happiness fades. But not our joy. For now we see Christ's flickering light of the Gospel. It has always been there, but we have not seen it the way we do now. This is why Paul, in the darkness of his prison cell, says with triumph: "*Rejoice in the Lord!*" His joy had increased, for his world had become dark.

The thief hanging from a cross was having the worst day of his life. He was about to die in shame. He was not happy, and he had no joy. But then Jesus spoke to him. He gave him the promise of Paradise. Nothing had changed in that thief's life to make it better. Nothing had changed to make him happy. But now he had joy. God was at peace with him. His sinful, wretched life was forgiven. The world lay in darkness from noon until three, but the flicker of light that came from the mouth of Jesus was brighter to that thief than the sun in all its glory. That man died with joy because his Lord drew near to him in peace.

This, my friend, is how you can live...and die. "*Rejoice,*" says Paul, for "*the Lord is near.*" God draws near to you, not to give you a happy day, but to fill your heart with joy and peace. Whether you are happy or sad, healthy or sick, free or in prison, full of life or living out your last days, your God is at peace with you. He forgives you of your sinful, wretched life. He draws near to you in your Baptism, in His words coming to you now, in His Holy Supper, so that your joy may be full and your heart and mind may be at peace.

Life, for you, is not about being happy. Life is about Christ because He is your life now and forever. And so whether you have a smile on your face, or not, you have a smile in your heart, for there is your joy. There Christ dwells in you. There He guards you with His peace - the peace He won for you on His cross. "*Rejoice in the Lord always*" is not a call to be happy. It's a call to live your life in Christ because He lived, and died, and now lives for you. Amen.