

“GOOD PLEASURE”

Sermon delivered by Elder Barbara Wheeler
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 21, 2019

Scripture Texts

Psalm 118: 19-29

Zechariah 9-10; 15-16

Philippians 1:27-2:13

Every year the leaders of this congregation ask the summer preachers to focus on a particular theme. It's a good idea. Without that theme, I'm afraid we would all be tempted to pull out last year's greatest-hit sermon. The results, week to week, might be interesting, but they would also be pretty disjointed. The downside of having a theme is that there's a good chance that the same points are made more than once, and maybe every Sunday.

This year's theme is "Finding Joy." Let me predict what you are going to hear repeatedly: Joy is different than happiness. Indeed, one of the preachers has used that line as her title, and the church's newsletter stole all our thunder by quoting David Brooks to that effect before the season even started.

I cannot disagree with the other preachers who have made or will make that argument. If my sermon is at all different from others, it will probably be for two reasons. First, along with Paul, I think that joy has something to do with suffering. Paul reminds the Philippians—using an ecstatic hymn that he either wrote or learned—that suffering is privilege because Jesus willingly became human like us, suffering, even dying, so that we could, as Paul says, "work to make joy complete." Second difference: Because Jesus is a tough role model—despite all those What Would Jesus Do bracelets we can never accomplish what he did—I am going to draw my examples of joy from the lives of people I and many of you knew well. It would, in fact, be impossible to be here today without remembering Bob Lamar, who served and loved this congregation and who died early this year. And my own strongest association with this church is Barbara Dudley, who poured her efforts into the preservation of the building and the history of the congregation. Both were role models for me from my childhood in Albany until their deaths, and both their lives provide examples of finding joy the way Paul told the Philippians to do it.

Here is Paul's formula in a nutshell. The only thing that matters, he says, is living in a manner worthy of the gospel. Worthy, for Paul, means united with others, in one spirit, standing side by side with them, working toward common goals. The Philippians can do this, he says, because they are privileged, not only in faith, but also in suffering. It's suffering, Christ's suffering for them and their own, that gives them strength. Suffering enables them to have empathy, to humble themselves, to look to the interests of others, encouraging and consoling them, showing compassion and mercy, and thus breaking down barriers as Christ did when he refused to exploit his privilege, took human form, lived and died as one of us.

The key to joy, the quality that Paul emphasizes several ways: "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, regard others as better than yourselves, look not to your own interest but others", the key quality is humility. John Calvin agreed: There are three theological virtues, he said: humility, humility and humility.

But when Paul made the claim in the middle of the Greco-Roman world, it was radical. Humility was disparaged in that culture. Low status was despised as a sign of weakness and servility. And so it is today, in a society and sometimes even a church where self-interest, bombast and self-aggrandizement pretty much rule. “The selfish eye, the pompous mind” (I’m quoting from an Fred Craddock, an eloquent commentator on this passage) “the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that [speaks] none, the heart that [has] little room for others, and the hand that [serves] only the self”. Sound familiar? These are the qualities that get most of the news coverage, that pave the way to fame and power, that are making many people rich. The one outcome they cannot produce, however, is deep and lasting joy.

To achieve that, you need to follow the route laid out by Paul: It’s not the way human beings naturally go: through suffering rather than around it, laying down privilege so that others may have justice, treating those who have greater needs and fewer resources as well as, sometimes better than, oneself. But the lives of Barbara Dudley and Bob Lamar testify to the feasibility of finding joy and peace on just such a path.

Both Barbara and Bob were privileged, like those Philippians. Barbara was born and married into prominent families. Bob served as a large church pastor and national denominational leader. Both were raised in religious homes and had strong church ties throughout their long and fruitful lives. At the same time, adversity and suffering helped to form their character. Bob’s father died when he was eleven and his youngest sibling was not even a year old. Barbara raised not only her own five children but also those of family members who temporarily could not. Her first husband died young, and she stepped, with no training, into the presidency of the major company he had led. These experiences, far from deflating or defeating them, gave them strength and sympathy with those who did not have their advantages.

Bob Lamar was one of the best-known Presbyterian ministers of his generation. He was moderator of the whole denomination. He co-chaired a committee that met for many years and finally proposed the reunion of the northern and southern branches of the Presbyterian Church that had been separated for more than a century. In Albany, he and his congregation were leaders in the drive for civil rights. But prominent as he was, he never threw his weight around, or for that matter, his considerable height. Quite the opposite: He was a model of humble service, counting others as better than himself. “Rather than bringing an agenda,” he said of his involvement in local racial justice struggles in the 60s, “we listened to the matriarchs of the Black community and the brothers about issues that affected their lives.” My mother was there to observe the efforts of Bob and other religious leaders. “They knew,” she says, “that their role was to hold the coats of the Black leaders who led the movement.”

Encouragement, compassion, consolation, mercy are the fruits of humility and foundation stones of joy. Barbara Dudley’s later years were marked by tragedy. A careless mother left a two-year old in a car with the engine running while she did an errand. The child managed to get free of his seat and put the car in gear. It careened across the Medusa town green, where George Dudley, Barbara second husband, was sketching. The car hit him, causing critical injuries. The child was not hurt, but in the aftermath the mother was paralyzed with remorse. The prosecutor wanted to bring charges. Barbara prevailed on him not to. “What good would that do?” she asked him. “It would only hurt the children.” She spoke to the mother quite firmly: she must pull herself together for the sake of her child.

Unity—what humility and compassionate love are supposed to make possible. Bob Lamar brought together two Presbyterian churches and formed strong ties to Catholic and Jewish leaders in the Capital District. He also crossed what has become the deepest and most difficult divide in church and society: the gulf between liberals and conservatives. He did not speak often in the Albany Presbytery, though he was by far its most famous and influential member. But one day a young Baptist minister, whom a small rural church wanted to hire because no Presbyterian could be found to serve there, was being rigorously questioned. In her resume she did not use gender-inclusive language, which is pretty much the norm in our liberal presbytery. Bob Lamar, a leading liberal, stood up and asked his colleagues to think less about their theological politics and more about the need of a tiny church to have a pastor. Without further debate, the Baptist minister was approved unanimously. Bob had led the way to what Paul called “full accord”: agreement on the most important things amid disagreement.

Humility, compassionate love, bridging divides. No one is born with these capacities. They are gifts from God. Barbara Dudley and Bob Lamar accepted these gifts and made full use of them. Their example shows us that the ways of the world—egoism, cruelty and the use of hate to divide and conquer—can be overcome.

Two more things we learn about joy from Barbara and Bob. The first verb in the passage I read —“live your life” or “conduct yourself” in a worthy manner—the word in the Greek text means “be a good citizen.” Paul’s focus is, first of all, the church community at Philippi, but there’s a suggestion that the kind of life that will bring joy is public as well as personal. This was certainly true for Barbara and Bob. They worked hard for justice and peace in the world beyond the church. Barbara supported organizations in this community, was active in politics, worked at the national level on historic preservation, and founded Bryn Mawr bookshops, whose profits provided scholarships to her alma mater. Bob was not only involved in every progressive movement during his lifetime—women’s and civil rights, anti-war organizing, care for creation—but he often led the way, stepped out in front before these causes became popular. In 1987, for instance, he appeared on the cover of the Father’s Day issue of a local magazine with his openly gay son Paul, making very clear his love and support. It would be at least another decade before other prominent Presbyterian ministers would join him in that kind of open advocacy for gay rights.

Last: Barbara’s and Bob’s lives teach us that even though joy is different from happiness, people who show us the way to real joy can also be happy, at least some of the time. Barbara and Bob were not stuffy moral exemplars. They were both fun to be around, and they had terrific senses of humor. When Barbara was told that she had a brain tumor and possibly only weeks to live, she said, “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to do better than that. I’m writing the history of my church and I need at least three months to finish it.” At Bob’s funeral, which some of you attended, Rev. Jim Miller told this wonderful story about Bob, a passionate golfer:

We were playing at Pine Haven. On a par 3 of about 150 yards, Bob hit a towering shot which nestled into the branches of a tree alongside the green. After I hit my tee shot we walked the length of the fairway and were about to look for Bob’s ball when it suddenly fell from the branches right in front of us at the edge of the green. Bob raised his arms, looked up and said, “Yes, Lord, just you and me.”

Humility. Compassion. Living and sometimes even suffering for others. Following Paul’s advice and Barbara’s and Bob’s examples would make the church, the country, the world much better places. God, who

as Zechariah wrote, is good and beautiful, give us the grace and strength to live this way and, as Paul wrote, takes good pleasure in our goodness. And that, friends, pleasing a good and beautiful God and loving others, will make our joy complete