

Surprised by Joy
Saints and Slaves
Philippians 1:1-2
Pastor Matt Skillen

Hello Friends! Welcome, once again, to St. Paul's Church. At St. Paul's we are a community of faith, meeting in a variety of places for the start of a new sermon conversation we are calling "Surprised by Joy." My name is Matt Skillen, I am one of the pastors here at St. Paul's Church and it is my humble joy to share with you from God's word.

We are calling this series "Surprised by Joy" because we believe that no matter what the culture of our country or community may be facing, we, those who profess to know Jesus Christ and those who claim to be saved by his grace, are called toward joy. And, joy seems to be in short supply today. Amen? Instead of joy, we often find reactionary anger and distrust. It's as if we arrived at a place in time where some can't even stand to be in the same room with one another. Our politics are polarized in both the statehouse and the church house. The tension is further increased by economics, by grief and the chaotic news cycle that doesn't seem to surprise us anymore. In the middle of everything unfolding today, we are called to be the movement of Jesus Christ—to be a people who point to the Kingdom of God during troubling times.

Today I am standing at one of the many remarkable historic sites here in Lancaster County, the Zurcher's Hotel in Christiana, PA. On this date, September 11th, 1851, 171 years ago, a bloody skirmish that would later be referred to as the Christiana Riot broke out in this town between two groups of people that some say likely led to the beginning of the American Civil War. Sites like this in our communities right here in Lancaster County stand as a reminder that we have faced extremely troubling circumstances in the past and only by God's providence and by His grace have we been able to see restoration and reconciliation following deeply divisive and chaotic periods in our history.

The historic Zurcher's Hotel behind me serves as both office space for a local business and as the Christiana Underground Railroad Center. During the 1830's and 1840's, people escaping the oppression of slavery would flee north across the Mason/Dixon Line that served as a boundary between free states and slave states. As you can imagine, because Lancaster County's southern border is the Mason/Dixon Line, our home county was a gateway in the pursuit of freedom and individual liberty that so many sought during this time in American History.

There are countless historical records of people starting a new life in freedom in the cities and towns of Lancaster County. For several years, those who had made it here would have stayed here and built a life for themselves, but the conditions for recently freed former slaves changed dramatically in 1850 with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. According to this law, Southern

landowners could pursue and recapture those who had escaped slavery. There was no statute of limitations on this law and, in many cases, those who had been liberated since birth were captured by bounty hunters and forced into slavery simply because their skin was black.

Just as today, but even more than we can probably imagine, the 1850's were a deeply divisive time. People in towns big and small disagreed on simple terms like freedom and liberty. Thaddeus Stevens, a Lancaster County politician and staunch abolitionist of the time said publicly, **“There may, and every hour shows around me, fanatics in the cause of false liberty – that infamous liberty which justifies human bondage, that liberty whose ‘cornerstone is slavery.’ But there can be no fanaticism however high the enthusiasm, in the cause of rational, universal liberty – the liberty of the Declaration of Independence.”**

Stevens called upon people of every corner of the commonwealth of PA to find grounding in this chaotic time in the original founding of the United States. To use the Declaration of Independence as a mirror and to ask ourselves, is there really a limit to the enthusiasm and joy that we can experience or share in light of authentic freedom?

Imagine with me for just a moment what our cities and towns would have looked like in the 1850's and early 1860's as slaveholders moved in and out of town looking for those who fled from slavery. We know that places like the Zurchers Hotel created hiding places for freedom seekers as stops on the underground railroad. And there are sites just like this in Lancaster, Columbia, Marietta, Mount Joy and Elizabethtown. These are places we drive by every single day, and they once stood at the frontlines in a battle that would ultimately boil over and overflow throughout the entire country. Friends, our culture and our communities have seen terribly trying times—matters of life and death, freedom and slavery—and in each case and episode the people of God are called to joy, to point anyone and everyone to Jesus Christ who through the Holy Spirit can bring rest, peace and, yes joy, to chaos.

While imprisoned, the Apostle Paul writes a letter to a new church in Philippi, which was a large and important city in the Roman empire. This new church of new Christians would have faced tremendous trials and persecution, just like the Apostle Paul was experiencing—being jailed and kept in captivity for advancing the cause for Christ. Hearing that perhaps the new church in Philippi was beginning to feel the ongoing stress of persecution and inner-church conflict and disagreements, Paul writes a letter to encourage, to support and to, yes, point the Philippians to the joy that is found in Jesus Christ.

Throughout this message series we will explore how this joy manifests between people who also seek a relationship with Jesus. Today I want to zoom in on the opening of Paul's letter—Philippians 1:1-2. Paul's opening of this important letter to the new church in Philippi packs an important and powerful message for us—the church of 2022.

He says in his opening,

**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the bishops and deacons:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

What I've come to understand is that this letter opens, according to Roman tradition. Verse 1, begins with the two names of the people sending the letter, Paul and Timothy, who would have been together when they formed the church at Philippi. Within Verse 1, we also see who the letter is being written to, the people of Philippi and, specifically, the overseers and deacons of the church. Two words used to describe the senders and the receivers of this letter, however, stand out to me and this is worth noting.

Paul qualifies himself and Timothy as "servants." That is the word the translators used in bringing together the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that I am using here today. However, the word in the original Greek text that Paul uses is "duloi" which derives from the root "dulos" and that more commonly translates into the word "slaves" and it would typically refer to someone who was an indentured servant, that is to say, someone who would have sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off or work off a debt.

While slavery has a significant meaning here in the very recent history of the United States, there are indeed similarities that exist between slavery that would have been prevalent in Roman Empire and slavery as we know it in America. However, there are some significant and clear differences too. This text, as with many others that speak to servitude and slavery in the Biblical story, have been misused to create a Biblical support for slavery. Just as Thaddeus Stevens would have railed against those who promoted a false freedom, a freedom in our country that would somehow simultaneously allow thousands to live in perpetual bondage, even in the opening of Paul's letter could have been used by some to proclaim that slavery in the context of owning other people for forced labor was, somehow, holy and just.

The context of Paul's uses of *dulos* or slavery is to note that it was he and Timothy who had devoted not only their hearts and minds, but indeed their complete bodies and beings to Christ. It was meant to show a level of devotion that went beyond the ritual and traditions of culture. It was a connectedness that was on a completely different level. He was saying that in light of physical persecution, in light of imprisonment, in light of the many trials and challenges that persist for Christians in the Roman culture, Paul claims a different identity all together. Neither a Jew nor a Roman, Paul is Christ's sold-out and completely committed slave.

The second word that stands out to me, and it stands out because it seems to purposefully oppose "servant" or "slave," is "saints." Paul refers to all the readers in the new church of Philippi as "saints." Let's zoom in to that word for a moment to formally compare translations. The word used in the original Greek is "hagioi." It means "to be set apart and holy". What Paul is saying, specifically to the people of Philippi and, by extension, to us the Twenty-first Century

church, is you are the “Holy ones of God.” Which seems remarkable on its own, but when you think carefully about both positions, slave and saint, you might, like me, hesitate at both. I don’t know if I want to be either a slave or a saint.

So, let’s unpack the hesitancy one might have with being a saint. Being a saint, one who is holy and set apart by God, could be perceived as a role that comes with significant responsibilities. When you think of a saint in our culture today you might think of Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, or, maybe when you think of the word “saint” you think of *those* Christians, right? You know who I am talking about. Those Christians who seem to be *just a little more holier* than everyone else. And maybe when you think about it a little more, if Paul is calling us all to be saints, maybe that is something you don’t want to be because it comes with significant hesitations. There could be increased stress in being holy and set apart by God. You could be criticized at work or school for being a saint. You could find yourself at odds with people in your family who look to distance themselves from you.

Then, when you think about what it means to be a slave (dulos) to Christ, a completely sold-out servant, you have similar hesitations. If you are like me, you don’t like to be indebted or indentured to anyone. Maybe, like me, you have issues with being submissive. Or, maybe you’ve convinced yourself that your life is too full and too busy to be occupied with more work from God.

Here’s the thing. It doesn’t matter what you think about these two words. And it certainly doesn’t matter what people might think about you. It isn’t about you, and it isn’t about me. It isn’t about the preferences or hesitations that we have. It is about God, and we are to honor him in all things. We are to honor him in our relationship with Him, in our relationship with our spouse, in our relationship with our kids, in our relationship with our parents, in our partnership with other believers, and in what we do when no one else is watching.

In our culture, there is plenty that can enslave us. The question is, who or what do you want to be a slave to? The Bible says that we are all saints because of what Jesus did and not because of what we do. Being a slave or a saint isn’t about being one of *those types* of Christians, it is about what you decide to give your life to. By giving your life to Christ, by accepting the grace he provides, you accept your divine place in the Kingdom of God. As God’s Child, the Bible says you are a Saint - set apart by the Holy Spirit in you, you are a Child of the Living God, you are Royalty, you are a Co-heir with Christ - set to inherit all of God’s Kingdom. You are a Faithful Warrior, and you are God’s partner in the redemption of the world.

Imagine how your day might go in this chaotic world if you woke up every morning seeing yourself how God sees you. What would your life look like today? What would your marriage look like? How would you choose to invest your time, energy, money? How would you treat people differently? How would it change your attitude?

In a chaotic world, it is the children of God, the followers of Jesus Christ, who can be a light for joy and hope. When division is common, the holy spirit has set apart saints of Christ are called

to point God's people toward unity and joy. We are to be the beacons of Christ's Kingdom, His ambassadors of Hope and Reconciliation—in arenas big and small.

For many years the Zerchers Hotel was a place of refuge and hope in a world turned completely upside down. It stands today as a reminder of who we are and where we have been. Look closely all around you. Notice the small details that God has placed in your life. Be surprised by his joy. Look at how he brings so much together.
Saint in Christ and slave in Christ.

Let us pray.