

## **Surprised by Joy**

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

**Pastor John Marcott**

Good morning! I'm Pastor John, one of the pastors here at St Paul's. It's my privilege to serve here and to share with you the word of God this morning.

Someone shared with me that I have a really soothing voice, which I took as a compliment until she said, "My boyfriend would love to have a recording of you speaking so he could go to sleep at night." So, I'm going to give you a question to maybe help keep you awake. Have you ever realized that it's so much easier to love people long distance than it is face to face? Now, someone in the first service burst out laughing when I said this. I think they took it seriously. But I learned this very early on, in my marriage with relatives. We would talk to them on the phone, we'd get cards, and our kids would send cards to them, and each year we would plan a visit to go see them. And some lived hours away. So, we would travel down to South Carolina, or Florida to see our relatives. Inevitably, we had a lot of fun and joy during the first couple of days we were there. My kids are a lot of fun and really cute, but, after about three days, all of the interruptions that the kids brought into their regimen that they were used to and all of the crying and all of the problems we had. After four or five days, I remember telling Julie, hey, look, maybe we should think about starting to pack up a little early because I think tempers are running a little thin. And usually, we would think about it and we'd always be a day late. It's so much easier to love people far away than up close and personal. And quite frankly, that's one of the dynamics behind the letter that we're reading in our series, Surprised by Joy. The letter of Philippians was written by the Apostle Paul from prison. He's either in Ephesus, which is a good month distance away traveling, or in Rome, which is about six weeks (traveling) away. The Philippians have sent resources to Paul in prison. Prison, back in the day, was not a state funded system. Unless people sent goods, you weren't really taken care of. So, they had sent Epaphroditus, their envoy, to Paul in prison, and the letter of Philippians is being sent back with Epaphroditus, thanking them for what they've given him. And yet in the letter itself, Paul says, thank you for loving me in this very concrete way. Then he writes this, and to tell you honestly, you can read this by just saying, wow, Paul, this is a nice sentiment. Or, if you realize what's going on in their relationship, you realize that there's a little more to it, and why he's saying this. So, we're up to chapter two in the Book of Philippians. We're at this point in the letter where Paul says, "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united in Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make

my joy complete by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” Basically, he's saying that if you're a Christian, if you've tasted of the goodness of the Lord, then be united. Sounds like a nice sentiment. I don't think any of us would disagree with that. You share the same faith together; you've shared the same experience of God's forgiveness and being reconciled to God. Why don't you guys just be united? But we learned there's a little bit more to this because later in the letter, even though Paul is appreciative of this church because they've been partners, there's some infighting going on in this church. And we might say, gee, that's a nice thought, you know, united to Christ. Why not be united with one another? It just makes sense, right? What Paul is saying is, as much as it's so logical – do it. It's kind of like Paul writing and saying, hey, look, I really appreciate your gifts. I really appreciate your love being sent to me. But if you want to give me the gift that I really want - will you guys just get along? You are united in Christ. What Jesus has done for us that has made us all, in a sense, joined at the hip with Jesus. In one sense, we all are united to him, therefore united to one another. But then he says - act like it. It's something that we might say to our kids. You are brothers and sisters, please act like family. Act like you really do love one another. Act like you're related. He's saying the same thing to them. And Paul gives us two reasons or rationales or motivations for this. Number one, who we are in Christ. And then the very character of Jesus himself and his example to us as what it means to love. So, he spells out in the next verse what exactly is involved. He says in verse three, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.” Pretty straight forward. We agree with it on the surface, exactly what he's calling for. But he is saying it demands you going against what we by nature, might think, which, by nature - we always look out for number one. So, he's calling us to go against what we might do instinctively and what our culture encourages us to do.

Now, I take this on great authority because I found this quote on a website called Mother Knows Best. Here's what this woman, Marguerite, writes. “Real love is hard. It takes hard work and dedication, a full commitment to a relationship. Real love is an action, not an emotion, not a feeling. Real love is an action. A choice made every second of every day to put someone else before yourself.” That's what Paul was specifying there. “Do nothing out of empty conceit or selfish ambition but think of others as better than yourself.” That is hard work. And yet, besides our status of being united in Christ, he also gives us Christ's example. He goes on in this passage saying “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and

on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

So, like I said before, the two main motivations are, number one, who we are in Christ after what Christ has done for us, all of the resulting blessings to us, therefore, we should act accordingly. But then you also have the example of Jesus Christ. And it's not just His sacrificial death on our behalf. You see, Paul in this poem, talks about Jesus, whose decision to put aside what was rightfully his for the sake of others, namely ourselves. So, he describes Jesus, who was God himself, laying aside that royal and divine privilege and becoming one of us. The creator became like the creature. And then, in all of his life, didn't pursue selfish ends or demand things or that people should respect him, but rather gave all of that leading up to the epitome of it when he died on the cross. His whole life had been death to self all along. In him doing that, God then rewarded him with a title and a name that is above all names - Lord of Lord, King of Kings for eternity. And so, in a sense, Paul, using Jesus as the example, is encouraging us to do the same and to await the same outcome in the sense of we look forward to when God will share His glory with us.

Now, here's one of the interesting things. It's not like God doesn't call us to do something and then doesn't provide for us for how we go about doing this. You know, you come to church each week and are reminded of who you are in Christ and what your responsibilities are to follow Christ, what God requires of you. But each day, each experience, each moment of the day, you tend to forget. You don't put it in perspective like that. So, God calls us to do that, and he calls us together to be encouraged by one another. But what else does He give us so that we can live up to that love life that he's calling us to? It is great that we're speaking about this on New Members Day because he gives us to each other to assist us in living up to this high calling.

I'd like to show you something that I'll explain afterwards but think about this video.



(The following is what was shown on a video presented at the service)

Pacer (noun)

Definition: A runner who sets a pace at the beginning of a race in order to help another runner break a record.

This year over 40,000 Americans will run a marathon.

They will train for 4 months, go through 2 pairs of shoes – and most of them will do it alone.

This Fall, you are invited to seek out a pacer to keep you in stride for the race of your life.

Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love & good works.

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.

Find a pacer

Encourage a pacer

Become a pacer

Contact: [Johnpm@stpauls.faith](mailto:Johnpm@stpauls.faith) for more information

The origin of this video comes from a story I can relate to, from my own experience. Now, please don't act too shocked when I tell you this. I used to be a long-distance runner. I used to run half marathons, and my experience when I would run a half marathon is that I would find someone in the multitude of people running, someone who was running a little faster than I was comfortable with at the beginning, and I would pace them. I would run alongside them so that our heel strike was in sync, and we would run, hopefully to the end the finish line together, pacing each other. And by doing that, you didn't have to really think very much. You just get your body into gear and follow, and I did this most of the time. I was running half marathons, about 10 to 12 a year, in hopes of running a full marathon at the end of the year when my body would be in condition. I always got injured before that happened, but ran, like I said, 10 to 12 half marathons a year. And back in the day when I was running, the New York City Roadrunners Club would do a number of half marathons during the summer. So, I would sign up and run those races, and that was my approach each time I would find somebody. At the beginning of the race, there were just thousands of people, so, after about the first mile, you're making your way out of the crowd. You catch somebody who's running a little bit of a challenging pace and you start pacing them. So, it was the Staten Island Marathon, and I'm running with the same guy. We get to the eight-mile marker. And we get to mile ten. And all of a sudden, he starts veering off the course. And so, at that point, the first actual verbal communication takes place where I say, "Hey, no, the track goes this way!" And he says to me, "I'm only running ten miles today. I live over here in this neighborhood. Take care!" Now I have 3.1 miles where I'm on my own, and I actually have to think about keeping pace. It's just a whole different experience. And I must admit, it was the hardest part of the race. Yeah. The last couple of miles are sometimes the hardest but doing it by yourself without having someone with you was so demanding physically and psychologically.

Paul uses this imagery of running a race and what God has laid out before us. Our lives are the same thing, a race to the finish line. Jesus is the One who's waiting at the finish line, rooting us on, cheering us to come and join him at the finish line. And the writer to Hebrews, talks about people lined up on the sides, cheering you on all the field, all the saints who have gone before us cheering us on. Paul writes about, at one point, to the Corinthians "Don't you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Run in such a way as to get the prize." Everyone who competes in the race goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. We do it to get a crown that will last forever. And so, in a real sense, we are on this race of life, of faith, heading toward Jesus, who is standing before us as the trailblazer who went before us. He already finished his race and is waiting for us and encouraging us. So, for us to live this life, which is a demanding call, to love, to lay down your life for others, for no greater love, has anyone that he laid out in his life for his

friends. And that's what we're called to do moment by moment, day by day. But to do it alone is not what we're called to do. The gift of the body of Christ is we have brothers and sisters to accompany us. And so, for us to best accomplish that and to live out the calling or to run the race that Christ has given to us, is to grab someone and to say, will you be there to pace me? And I, you. This is one of the greatest gifts of the church that God has given us, you know, in a sense. Our salvation consists of Christ dying for the penalty of our sins. And the spirit giving us power to overcome our selfish inclinations. And he gives us the church for us to practice and to challenge and encourage one another on to live the life that He has given us. And yet so many of us don't take advantage of that gift of fellowship and encouragement.

So, I challenge you today... If you want somebody to pace with. If you want somebody to encourage you to love and to do good deeds, look around you. God has given you the gift of the church. Maybe it's just one person that you're going to stay in touch with? Call on the phone and pray? I have a prayer partner that I've had for many, many years. We now live 3 hours away from each other. So, every Thursday we're on the phone before he goes to work, and before I go to work, and we share what's going on in our lives and we pray for one another. I have other friends who I contact, and we get together and just talk through things. I have a small group of men who I get together with, and we share what's going on in our lives. The most important thing is to have one or more people that you can talk about what's really going on in your life and how God is challenging you or helping you and that you're praying for one another, that you're supporting and encouraging one another on because you're pacing together. Each of us needs to find a pacer, be it one or be it many. Each of us needs to be a pacer for others in the race. And so therefore, I encourage you to find yours. We do have some small groups and huddles here at St Paul's, but we all need to be part of some type of group run. So, contact me if you're interested in doing that and you'll hear more about different seminars coming up to discuss huddles. But let us run together the race that is before us. Looking forward to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Let us pray.

Lord, thank you for all that you have given us in Jesus. When Paul writes in the Philippians, he says, if there's any encouragement in Christ, if there's any love and comfort in the spirit, if there's any fellowship, if there's any love and compassion, because of all of that, give yourselves to one another. Give yourself in unselfish, unambitious service to one another so that we might be pleasing to you and even resemble and replicate Jesus's love and selflessness toward one another and toward all that you have given us in our lives so that we might please you and give you honor and glory. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.